

Hecatomb TCG Fiction

by David Noonan

Episode 1: Carnival of Carnage

As he clambered up the beams of the wooden roller coaster, Viktor paused to listen to the screams wafting up from the tangle of track below. Shouts and screams are an ordinary part of the background noise of an amusement park, mixing with the calliope music, the shouting barkers, and the laughter of children at play. But as he neared the top of the coaster, Viktor heard the character of the screams change. The screams drew themselves out and became shriller, then started to undulate as the screamers gasped briefly to draw breath, then continue their scream.

Those aren't roller-coaster screams, Viktor thought. That means the hunt has begun.

A brief wave of his hands allowed Viktor to make out the carnival below him clearly, as a reddish light only he could see limned every building. With a muttered incantation, Viktor -- or more accurately, Viktor's perceptive self -- hovered above the amusement park and witnessed the rampage of his latest creation.

The hulking figure shambling down the midway was once a monster of legend, Tamnnis the Dreamer. It took Viktor years of study to master the necessary dark pacts and conjurings to bring the hideous Tamnnis out of the primeval past. And that was just the beginning, Viktor mused.

Within his conjuration chambers, Viktor sacrificed several of his believers to Tamnnis, merging their essence with that of the reptilian horror. Using an Egyptian Ritual of the Ineffable Joining, he combined Tamnnis's strength with that of a creature beyond death: the skull swarm. The resulting abomination existed for one purpose: to hunt. In this case, to draw out another creature not unlike itself, thought Viktor.

As Viktor's eyes floated overhead, Tamnnis traced a bloody, wandering path through the amusement park. It smashed a shooting gallery to splinters, scooping up an old man in its claws and biting his torso completely through. Blood sprayed across Tamnnis's head and chest as it whipped its serpentine torso around. Amid the wreckage, the shooting gallery attendant raised a shaky arm, pointing one of the toy rifles at Tamnnis. A laugh whistled through the creature's crooked maw, then it leapt at the attendant, knocking away the rifle and locking its jaws on the man's neck. Then Tamnnis rose from a crouch to its full height and shook its head from side to side. Within its jaws, the attendant's body flopped and lolled hideously.

So my new beast has a sense of humor. How intriguing, Viktor thought. But this slaughter is pointless unless it reveals my foe.

The screams faded into the distance as the park's visitors fled. Only the calliope music from the rides' loudspeakers remained. Viktor touched the medallion on his slim chest and furrowed his brow in concentration, forming his thoughts with care. Below him, Tamnnis staggered briefly as it received new orders from its creator and master. Crouching low, it began to stalk through the amusement park, hunting anyone too frightened or foolish to flee.

Viktor left Tamnnis to its hunt, expanding his sorcerous perceptions to encompass the entire park. He sensed the auras of dozens of ordinary souls, some unconscious, some hysterical, some driven mad by the carnage of Tamnnis. But near the carousel, Viktor felt a dead spot -- a bit of gray amid the yellow and green auras of mortals frightened beyond comprehension.

Go, Tamnnis! Viktor thought as he clutched his medallion. That's an abomination -- and its master can't be far behind. Viktor began an incantation of defense, weaving eldritch tendrils around his body, then extending the red-black tentacles so they crept through the park like mist.

Tamnnis paused amid the bumper cars, its arms and face covered in gore. Then it shuffled toward the carousel, leaning forward on its forelimbs like a gorilla.

Lurching and swaying atop the carousel's spindle was Tamnnis's foe. Stitched together from multiple cadavers, the abomination had two complete torsos grafted to a squat pair of legs. Railroad spikes pierced all four arms, causing each wound to bleed profusely. One torso drooped forward, its hands scrambling atop the carousel, while the other gazed across the midway, uttering a keening wail as Tamnnis approached.

The twinned husk leapt from the carousel as Tamnnis charged. The two abominations clutched each other, and each one's claws and teeth found purchase in the flesh of the other. Crossing two of its arms in front of it, the cadaver-creature blocked Tamnnis's maw from reaching its neck. The two other arms battered Tamnnis's sides, the spikes penetrating deep within Tamnnis's ancient flesh.

Tamnnis broke the clinch with a twist of its torso and a shrug of its hulking shoulders, then rolled back toward the carousel. The twinned husk uttered a wail of triumph as it rose to its feet, bashing its spike-laden arms against one another. Tamnnis snapped the shafts of two carousel horses and hurled them at the dead thing, knocking it down to one knee.

Then Tamnnis leapt, extending its clawed hands and baring its fangs. Its claws found one torso while its maw found the other, and it tore away hunks of flesh, flinging them into the air. The two abominations rolled across the midway in a cloud of dust and blood. The twinned husk beat its arms against Tamnnis's scaly hide, rending deep gashes in its flesh.

Tamnnis tried to howl in pain, but only a gurgle emerged because so much undead flesh was in its mouth. The torso in its clawed arms had stopped struggling, but the one in its mouth was carving up Tamnnis's back, its spikes plunging into Tamnnis again and again. With supreme effort, Tamnnis clambered to one knee, then lurched upright. The reptilian abomination twisted its head to the left, then to the right as it held the twinned husk aloft. The undead creature started thrashing its limbs wildly, but the spikes found little more than air.

That's the death shake. Time to make my appearance and find the creature's master, Viktor thought. He clasped his hands, then whisked himself incorporeally along his misty tendrils to the carousel.

As Viktor rematerialized near the carousel, Tamnnis rent the twinned husk asunder. From its ruined form emerged a black cloud of crows that wheeled and circled into the sky, their guttural caws filling the air. Thousands of the ebon birds darkened the neon glare of the amusement park, rendering Viktor temporarily blind.

But with his aura sight, Viktor saw a bright red glow near the Tilt-A-Whirl, and this glow was fading into the distance. Tamnnis was too busy clawing at crows to move, so Viktor took a few steps toward the departing aura. With a flash of perception, he saw a red-haired woman in a trenchcoat, running toward a motorcycle.

Chasing a fleeing sorcerer is probably a bad idea, he thought. But my tendrils will capture a bit of her aura, so my magic can track her down later.

And I just know I've seen that red hair before. But where?

Episode 2: Horror Given Birth

The heavy silence surrounding the rusting freighter that was anchored in the harbor was broken suddenly by muted guttural roars and the faint sounds of flesh wetly slapping on bloody flesh.

Within the ship's cavernous hold, Minerva watched as her mutant creation feasted on the corpses -- mostly itinerant sailors and harbor drunkards -- that her minions had been gathering for weeks. This mutant is so methodical, she thought. Time after time, the muscular thing would shuffle over to a distended corpse, bellow at it, then whip back the seaweedlike growths along its spine. Then it pummeled its meal into a bloody jelly with its massive forearms before drooping its mouth-tentacles into the ruin of flesh and splintered bone. After consuming the corpse with a wet slurping, it shuffled over to a new corpse and roared at it, beginning again.

Minerva rolled a bloodstained carpet across the catwalk above the hold and spread out her arcane implements: golden sickle, silver mirror, wavy-bladed dagger, and yellowing tomes.

"You are ready, Xihouto." A command with an implicit question.

"As you say, mistress," replied a quavering voice from the hold. Minerva peered over to see that her sorcerous apprentice was still safe behind the eldritch barrier she'd painted on the deck of the ship's hold. Around the elderly man were the beakers, canisters, and other receptacles of the alchemist's trade.

"When it consumes the last sailor, I'll summon the next aspect. Be ready with the Hyarektal Dust -- I want this to go quickly," Minerva said.

We've been in a hurry so much lately, but this won't work if I rush it, Minerva thought. Since Viktor's surprise attack at the amusement park, Minerva had been on the run: first to a mountain temple, then a bayou village, and now this freighter. Not that I don't enjoy a chase, she thought. But ten years ago, I got away from him so perfectly, and this time he's pushing me hard.

But in every sense of the word, I'm not the same person I was back then. And I suppose I have Viktor to thank for that. And for this.

Minerva swept back her red hair, then unclasped the silver chain around her neck. Dangling from it was an ivory sphere. A quick twist of the sphere's lower half, and a carefully folded piece of parchment fell into Minerva's hand.

It's only one page. But that's enough.

Raising her arms to the air, she began to read the prayers and incantations written on the page. "Oh Glotra, daughter of consumption and greed, attend to me! Consume this consumer of flesh, that you may together feast without ceasing!"

The air in the hold shimmered, then seemed to crack apart like a shattered window pane. With a hissing roar, a reptilian, winged creature suddenly appeared in the hold. It opened its slavering maw, vomiting forth bloodstained golden coins, then charged the seaweed mutant, blithely picking at the bones of the last corpse.

Stretching its mouth beyond what biology would allow, Glotra gulped down the mutant, then began to change itself. Its wings took on a tattered, kelplike texture, and it rose up on its hind legs, its spine shortening until it took on a twisted, bipedal shape.

Minerva smelled copper. Raising her hand to her face, she realized that her nose was bleeding from the exertion of the incantation. That took more out of me than I thought. But I can't stop now.

"The dust, Xihouto!"

From behind the barrier, the old man hurled a leather packet at Glotra, who dropped to all fours to sniff at it. Then the abomination collapsed, its bulk making the entire hold shiver as it fell.

Minerva cast weary eyes down at the sleeping form of her creation.

"I need a moment to rest. Tell me again about Peru, Xihouto."

"We have the crew waiting, mistress. And yes, they're . . . obedient. We sail south, and in a matter of weeks we can have the whole operation running from the Ruined Altar of Temachtoplac. You know what my ancestors did there. You know what power it holds." Indeed I do, thought Minerva. "And the cults here in the States?"

"The town of Fish Harbor remains, of course. We move Esteban's followers down there immediately, and we encourage pilgrimages to Peru among the Church of Unified Light. The local villagers near the site expect a flame-headed incarnation to appear soon."

"Flame-headed? A nice touch, Xihouto. Although I think I'll make for myself an ebony skin this time. I haven't done that in years."

"As you say, mistress. You should rest, for you have indeed created a horror beyond measure."

"We're not done yet, Xihouto. My last creation didn't go far enough, and that's a mistake I'm not going to make again." Minerva furrowed her brow. "Xihouto, feed both of those flasks into its maw. Quickly -- before it awakes -- then get back behind the barrier. Minerva turned to page through a second grimoire, stopping at a page dark with scribbled, angular text.

"Arise, Feculus, Lord of the Sewer! I join thee with Glotra! Arise and become one with horror!"

Wet, popping sounds filled the dank air of the hold as a green-brown foam seeped upward from the deck. Larger bubbles of a bilious green grew within the foam, clustering together and climbing upward. The mass began to move like an ocean wave, surging toward the unconscious form of the Glotra abomination.

Pooling around the mutated dragon, the slimy liquid began to extrude itself through Glotra's nose and mouth, streaming upward like a waterfall in reverse. Glotra's skin began to distort and bubble, while ripples and waves grew visible beneath its scaly skin. The abomination's squat legs disappeared into its expanding bulk as it began to liquefy.

The creature's eyes snapped open suddenly. Raising itself on its still-massive forearms, it considered its new form: draconic wings and a reptile's maw, but with the pallor and tentacles of the mutant it consumed. And fetid, bubbling slime had replaced its lower body, carrying it around on a wave of liquid filth.

The abomination roared in triumph as it surged across the hold and beat its arms against the bulkhead.

"It is done. Behold what I have wrought -- an abomination that will help me darken the very stars!" Minerva staggered before her work table, wild-eyed and grinning, her chin and mouth wet with her own blood.

"As you say, mistress," said Xihouto. He bowed and departed, careful to conceal two still-full flasks of a black-flecked liquid.

Scurrying to his cabin, he gently laid the flasks in a dark, wooden box beneath his bunk. "Yes, darken the very stars, I'm sure. But without the serums here, your abomination's sense of obedience may be somewhat . . . malleable."

Episode 3: The Mystery of the Mistress

"Just tell me what I want, and I'll put the knife away. It's as simple as that."

"Never!"

Viktor sighed. With a casual wave of his fingers, the silver dagger floating above the bound man's neck pricked his ear, then traced a line on the canvas of the straitjacket.

That's the scary part -- when you move the dagger out of sight. His breathing quickens every time I do it. How intriguing.

"Look, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that this is just one more trial -- some kind of grand sacrifice that you'll make to protect everyone else. But here's today's lesson: It just doesn't work that way."

Viktor waved his hands again, and the knife began its journey up the man's body again. His captive thrashed and twisted on the hotel room bed, trying to fling himself away from the knife. But the straps on the straitjacket and the shackles on the bedposts held.

Viktor paused the knife and let the man flop around on the bed for a while. When exhaustion set in, Viktor floated the knife over his face briefly, then spoke. "I'll make it easy on you. Don't give up any secrets, but tell me about the Mistress. You're a smart guy. You can talk without giving up your precious secrets, right?"

Silence from the captive. He's clenching his jaw; that's classic 'I want to say something but I know I shouldn't' body language. Now I deliver the changeup.

"Not a talker, are you? That's fine. Why don't you just listen for a while?"

The captive twisted his neck, forcing his head as far from Viktor as possible.

"You don't have to look at me -- just listen. I know you're busy being brave. Inside that little mind are all these brave little 'don't' thoughts. 'Don't say anything,' 'Don't show fear,' 'Don't react when he hurts you.'"

"I know because I can hear every one of those 'don'ts.' I've heard them from every person on the trail that led me to you." Viktor paused for a moment, letting the implication sink in.

And what a trail it's been, thought Viktor. Ever since the battle at the amusement park, he'd used sorcery, a network of fanatic followers, and old-fashioned detective work to get to this point. He'd carved a bloody path through an Oregon commune, a Malaysian mosque, and an entire town in the Australian outback

while on the red-haired woman's trail. And finally this morning, Viktor captured someone who personally knew the mysterious "Mistress."

"Barry, you're a temple leader for the Church of Unified Light. Irony, isn't it, that you're talking to someone whose mental powers beggar anything you promise to the faithful? I'm inside your head right now -- and I didn't need a 'Cthonic Crystal' or a 'Transcendent Mind Seminar' to get there. You people can't even spell 'chthonic' correctly, much less tap into its power."

"The Church has power! The Mistress has power!"

There's his voice -- now keep him going. "You're half right, Barry . . ."

"You inquisitors don't scare me, because the church is what matters, not me. You'll probably kill me in a few minutes, but the church will keep going. You can't get all of us. Not in a million years!"

"But what if I get the Mistress? Maybe that's all I want."

"The Mistress doesn't matter -- she's just our guide. If you murder her, we'll still reach the Golden Transcendence. We're closer than you can possibly imagine."

Viktor bellowed a harsh, mirthless laugh. "Oh, you'd be surprised at what I can imagine. Let me guess: The Mistress told you that the Golden Transcendence was some sort of 'mankind sharing their inner thoughts in universal brotherhood' thing."

"You'd never understand . . ."

Now I drop a truth-bomb on him. "Oh, I understand, Barry. I understand because I've got cults of my own. Temple of the Final Days? Mine. Reverend DeSalle? Mine. The Nelson commune in the papers last week? Mine."

"Your Mistress has them, too. You're not the first follower of the Mistress to wear that straitjacket, Barry. You're just the first one from your particular Church."

The captive clenched his eyes shut and started shaking his head back and forth. He's denying it with his surface thoughts, but deep down inside he's processing it. He's checking it against what he's seen over the last five years. Good.

"But there's a difference between my cults and the 'churches' of your Mistress." Viktor paused. Make him ask -- make him break through his own wall. "Want to know what it is?"

The captive's head stopped shaking. Motion paused as if the hotel room was holding its breath. Then a plaintive croak from the captive: "What?"

"I have exactly one scruple, Barry. Those who follow me know exactly what I'm trying to do: End the world. They might be delusional or suicidal -- I'm sure many are -- but they know that they're working toward destroying everything, forever and ever, amen."

"Your Mistress wants to end the world before I get my chance. And she lied to you because she's going to sacrifice her minions to make it happen. The Mistress isn't bringing you a million years of mankind living in telepathic harmony, Barry. She's bringing you two months of the status quo, then the world dying in screams."

"Think about it. Haven't you heard a lot of 'change is coming soon' language from your Mistress lately? And I hear she might be moving you somewhere . . ."

"No . . ." Not much energy in that denial, Barry. You're processing again.

"Tell me where the Mistress is, and I'll take you along. You can see the truth for yourself, right in the presence of the Mistress. And isn't the unified light supposed to reveal truth? I think I heard that in one of your sermons."

"Leave me alone..." The captive's eyes opened, wet with tears.

Token resistance. "I'm putting away the knife, Barry. Why don't you get some sleep, and then we'll talk some more later."

The captive's shoulders drooped, and every joint beneath the straitjacket released its tension.

"Sleep, Barry. And when you wake up, I've got something else to show you. Something I found in the basement of your church."

Episode 4: Scent and Ascent

Master says I'm not supposed to leave the ziggurat. So I don't. But I like to climb to the top and glimpse out across the green jungle. Master thinks I sleep all day, but I always stay awake long enough to see the sea of leaves below our mountains. But then I see the humans coming down the path from the village and climbing the steep stairs. When they're halfway to the top, I have to scurry back to my special chamber deep underground. I'm very careful.

Then I sleep, and I dream of Master. He teaches me how to pretend to be something I'm not. Like a human. Or a snake. Master teaches me how to hunt, and how to protect myself. He teaches me about magic. Master knows so much, and he says I have to learn it all quickly.

Sometimes, after my lessons are over, I dream of other things. I dream of the village in the jungle, and I imagine myself walking through the plaza with an obsidian dagger in my hand. The humans are screaming and running away. I look down at my hands, and they're bloody. But they're human hands. So I start screaming, too, and then I wake up, safe inside the ziggurat.

I wonder whether the real village looks like the one I dream about. And I wonder why there's so much blood that it goes to waste on my hands.

Master teaches me to be fastidious. Blood is never to be wasted.

Yesterday the dreams were particularly intense, and I am sluggish as I rouse in my chamber. I stretch my limbs, preen the few feathers I have left on my back, and look for the bowl Master always leaves for me.

The bowl is empty. I double over in hunger briefly, but then I inhale the stuffy air of the ziggurat, and the tingle sets my veins afire. I smell humans! And they're still inside the ziggurat, even though the sun must have set long ago.

An empty bowl, and humans in the ziggurat -- Master must want me to hunt. I begin to climb. My lips curl back to reveal my teeth, and I find I can't close my mouth. And by the time I reach the first flight of stairs, I don't want to.

The first one is a woman, bent over a piece of paper like the ones Master sometimes looks at. I leap on her back and sink my teeth deep into her back. She gurgles -- is she trying to scream? -- and starts thrashing around the dusty hallway floor. Oh, and her blood! It has a tang that I've never tasted before, and it froths between my teeth. I can hear my own blood singing in my ears as I drink deeply. I'm so excited that I spill a little blood when she arches her back for the last time. When I'm done with her, I lick my mess off the floor. Even mixed with the dust of the corridor, it's a rich, red feast, and I consume it without shame.

The second one is a man, his boots clicking on the stone of the Chamber of Serpents. I have to concentrate and push away his smell, lest I be overwhelmed. Master would want me to be careful. I slip into the man's shadow and travel with him as he walks, flickering as he passes each torch on the wall. The man wears green clothes and carries a strange medicine stick in his hands. (A fragment of a dream speaks to me: "Soldier." But the word is meaningless to me.)

I sniff the air, exhilarating in the aroma of the human. But I do so too loudly and he hears me. He spins around, waving the medicine stick around in front of him. But I'm inside his shadow, and I spin around when he does, so I'm still behind him.

This human is smart. After a moment, he realizes that his shadow isn't supposed to move behind him when he spins around. He spins around again, watching his shadow rotate behind him, then spins a third time, his face twisting with disbelief and fear. He points his medicine stick at his shadow, and it roars, expelling an angry little stone that puts a gouge in the floor.

I can't resist the smell of blood anymore. I leap out of the human's shadow, bury my fangs in his chest, and start feeding. With a crunch, his bones give way under my jaws, and I taste his blood. It's even richer and more intoxicating, and now I know why. The man's scent changed once he saw his shadow move. It must be fear that makes humans smell and taste so good.

I'm fastidious, just like Master would want, and this time I don't spill a drop. Now I know what I must do: bathe the humans in fear before I consume them. I ascend quickly through the ziggurat, passing through each silent, stony chamber like a wisp of torch smoke.

At the Slave's Staircase, I pause again, my mind struggling to stay afloat in a tidal wave of sensation. Three new scents intermingle. They're stronger scents than I've ever inhaled, and it takes me a moment to identify each one.

The first is a flat, ugly smell. It's a massive, scaly, earthy scent, but it also smells of smoke and decay. It has no blood-smell, and nothing of the jungle about it. This is a smell from elsewhere.

The second is a human smell -- a woman whose blood sings with power. In her blood I scent feathers, salt, and the weight of secret age. And her scent has a heat to it -- almost as if it would sear my nostrils if I breathe too deeply.

The first scent repels me, but the second promises a blood-feast that beggars my pitiful imagination. But neither draws me up the staircase.

I'm drawn by the third scent. It smells of the jungle and the village, of shining gold and darkest obsidian. A dream-fragment whispers a word to me: "Xihouto."

Compelled by Master's scent, I begin to creep up the staircase.

Episode 5: Key to Victory

The invisible eye of Viktor's presence followed his abomination as it crept up the steps of the ziggurat. It paused at a landing, pressing its immense foreclaws against the ancient stone. Tamnnis is sensing vibrations within the structure . . . how intriguing, thought Viktor. Then the creature, a combination of ancient myth, undead necromancy, and eldritch power, resumed its climb.

Four soldiers stood near the top of the ziggurat, guarding the passage to the monolith's interior. Viktor regarded them from his sorcerous, disembodied state. They're still alive, unlike the villagers we passed on the trail.

Viktor prepared instructions for the Tamnnis abomination: a telepathic series of arcane symbols, each of which promised reward and threatened punishment to the creature he'd created. But his concentration was interrupted when the soldiers slumped over, blood-froth bubbling out of their mouths. Within a second, four bodies lay atop the ziggurat, red foam continuing to emerge from mouths, noses, and ears.

That wasn't me! thought Viktor. The red-haired woman I'm chasing is soul-stealing, and she isn't exactly being subtle about it. She'd do that only if she were desperate -- or in the process of making a Final End.

Conjuring a new set of symbols in his mind, Viktor ordered Tamnnis to sprint to the top of the ziggurat. Magical barriers prevented the perception-tendrils of Viktor's mind from entering the ziggurat, so he reshaped his corporeal body atop the ziggurat and walked down the stairs behind his creation.

The gray stone staircase zigzagged downward for several hundred feet, then opened into a large chamber, graven with images of laughing gods, bloody sacrifices, and horrid beasts. Near the center of the chamber was the woman, slumped on the floor with a cascade of red hair covering her face. An older man in ceremonial Aztec garb pointed a closed fist at a gray, feather-backed monstrosity. As Viktor watched, the gray creature pounced on the tentacled back of a draconic monster whose hindquarters trailed off into a wave of ooze. The draconic creature lurched across the chamber, crashing into a wall as the gray creature sunk its teeth deep into its back, tearing free a mass of wriggling, tentacled flesh.

Two abominations, and probably two endbringers, Viktor thought. I've arrived at an interesting time -- too interesting to interrupt, at any rate.

"Why...won't you...fight back...?" moaned the woman from the floor. The draconic creature had stopped moving and was starting to disincorporate with alarming speed.

"Your creation is missing an ingredient! But my mecatl is complete!" cackled the old man, opening his hand to reveal a vial of black-flecked liquid. "And thus I and my people are revenged, Minerva!"

Minerva?

Viktor stepped lightly to the bottom step of the staircase to get a better look at the woman. She raised her head wearily, but hate gleamed from her eyes. And in that moment, Viktor knew her. London twenty years ago -- Evelyn, the piano teacher in the flat below mine. She left for New York after that last fight. But she's a sorceress?

Arranging the arcane symbols in his mind, Viktor ordered the Tamnnis-creature forward. It sprang into midair as the mecatl leapt toward Minerva. The two abominations met jaw to jaw, their maws interlocking at right angles while tails, claws, and wings thrashed about. The two creatures fell to the floor, their impact reverberating around the room. Tamnnis broke the jaw-clinch and snapped its head forward, aiming for the other abomination's neck. The mecatl's ropy lower body wrapped around Tamnnis as its upper body sprang back, avoiding Tamnnis's fangs.

The abominations rolled across the chamber floor in a grapple, with Tamnnis trying to reach the mecatl's neck while the mecatl constricted Tamnnis and tried to land a bite of its own. As they struggled, the old man kneeled, placing both hands on the floor of the chamber. The torches lining the walls dimmed, and the figures carved on the stone walls shivered, then began to dance.

"This temple hasn't known such a sacrifice in five centuries -- but it will consume you all! Thus it ends at the hands of Xihouto, the sun god reborn!" shouted the old man, his face furrowed in concentration.

Viktor felt more than heard the rumbling of the stones beneath him, then a wave of nausea and fatigue forced him to his knees. Viktor felt his magical defenses begin to evaporate; his connection to his own followers severed. The ziggurat is amplifying his magic. This whole place is a trap!

"Viktor . . ." the red-haired woman cried. "Tell me you forgive me."

"What?" Viktor looked across the chamber. The woman's eyes were pleading. Tamnnis and the mecatl continued to grapple in the center of the chamber, but Tamnnis's head-lunges were growing wilder and more desperate. The old man continued to kneel, muttering an incantation at the floor.

Viktor crawled toward the woman. I'm too weak to do anything else. Reaching her, he pulled up short. She rose up on her arms, revealing a bloody hole in her chest. Broken ribs ringed a circular cavity -- a cavity where a human heart should be. "Who are you really?"

"Call me Minerva. I can help you . . . but you have to forgive me first."

Viktor whipped his head around to check on the abominations and Xihouto. Still fighting -- better hurry. "Sure, I forgive you. What's the help?"

"Back in England . . . I knew the whole time what you really were, and I wanted that power for myself. But I didn't have centuries of study or vast resources. I had the next best thing: a lover too preoccupied to notice simple theft. Open my necklace."

Viktor grabbed the chain from around her neck. Twisting the clasp, he pulled out the piece of parchment and spread it out on the chamber floor.

Recognition was instantaneous. The stolen page from the Key of Solomon! I lost this back in London, and its absence has blunted my power ever since.

"For me, it's just a power source. But I know you're capable of more . . . subtle work with it. If I can't be the one to end it all, I'd rather you do it than Xihouto."

But Viktor barely heard her words. He was already chanting. The medieval demonologists who compiled the Key of Solomon had little in common with the Incan blood-mages. But the underlying principles of place-magic are constant, thought Viktor. Constant enough to shut the ziggurat down.

Viktor and Tamnnis both jerked upright when the surge of restored energy crashed into the chamber, while Xihouto shrieked in surprise and pain.

Keep chanting. Don't let him rebuild the link, thought Viktor. Tamnnis shuddered, then tore free from the mecatl's grasp. The mecatl leapt again, but Tamnnis blocked the bite with its immense forearms. Pushing forward, Tamnnis pinned the mecatl against the stone wall, then sunk its teeth deep into the mecatl's gray neck-flesh. Tamnnis roared as his snout came back bloody, then plunged down again for a second bite. Then Tamnnis's jaws locked securely on the mecatl's neck, and it was over soon. As the mecatl expired, Xihouto collapsed. The last soul he used was his own, but it wasn't enough, Viktor thought.

Viktor paused for a moment, stooping over Minerva's body. He rolled her over on her back, gently closed her eyes, and brushed back the hair from her face -- hair turned snowy white.

I suspected the thief to be Gilman or one of the others all this time, not someone I knew from ordinary life. But with an intact copy of the Key, I'm a lot closer to the end.

Picking up the parchment, Viktor and the Tamnnis abomination began the long climb out of the ziggurat and back to civilization.

On the edge of the forest, a man in expedition gear opened a worn journal. Tracing a finger down the first page, he paused, then crossed "Minerva/Xihouto" off his list. Stowing the journal, he began a long walk in the other direction.

Episode 6: The Doctor's Symphony

"Have a seat, Ms. Bauer. I appreciate you meeting me this late at night -- laboratory time is at a premium, even for me."

"Of course, Dr. Gilman." Kristen reclined on the examination table. She shivered, then briefly wondered why. She was used to being cold at the doctor's office, and her paper robe didn't provide much warmth. But Dr. Gilman's lab was warm, almost stuffy.

The pale, balding form of Dr. Gilman appeared from behind an immense, donut-shaped imaging unit. "You passed the last batch of tests with flying colors, Ms. Bauer. In a few hours, your diabetes will be a thing of the past."

"But that's not all you're doing, right? The data you showed me . . ."

Gilman interrupted her, holding up one latex-gloved hand. "Yes, we should see sharp increases in abstract reasoning and other intelligence markers. And you'll never again have problems with, shall we say, drive and motivation?"

Kristen blushed. "Will you put me under for the splicing?"

"You've read my work, Ms. Bauer, so you know that isn't necessary. And let's not call it splicing. Mozart didn't splice together themes in his *Jupiter* symphony, and I'm not splicing your genetic material. You're the first movement in a symphony of genetics, Ms. Bauer -- you're a pioneer for your whole species."

Kristen suppressed another shiver. "You're the pioneer, Doctor. I'm just the patient."

"Nonsense, my dear. You're willing to trust a procedure that would stagger the imaginations of the so-called scientists at this university. It took me a long time to find someone who understood my work and wanted its, shall we say, therapeutic benefits?"

Dr. Gilman changed his latex gloves, then picked up a syringe as big as his beefy forearm. "The serum comes first, then I'll wheel you into the MRI so I can watch brain activity throughout the procedure." As he pointed to the imager with one hand, he used the other to inject the needle into Kristen's shoulder.

Kristen felt the sharp jab of the needle, then clenched her teeth. *That's the last needle I'll ever have to put up with. No more insulin injections!*

Kristen's arm began to tingle. A hot wave spread into her torso, then flowed down each of her other limbs. Her head felt too heavy to lift, but she felt the warm air on her skin as Dr. Gilman wheeled her into the MRI unit. The tingling across her body became a grasping, scrabbling sensation -- like fingers wriggling against her skin, but from inside her body. *Keep it together, girl. Tell the doctor what's happening.*

"The tingling is . . . intense, doctor."

"Once the first stage is complete, that should fade. I'm inserting the probes now."

Kristen felt wetness on the soles of her feet, then the sharp pain of a scalpel. Two swift cuts on each foot, then knees, hips . . . by the time the scalpel reached the base of her skull, she felt a wave of dizziness. *Blood loss? I wasn't expecting anything invasive . . . or this painful.*

"The Thulykos stage is complete, Ms. Bauer. Rest a moment, then we'll start the second stage."

With great effort, Kristen lifted her head. Translucent cables pulsated with clotted liquid, pumping a greenish-yellow fluid into her body. Wincing in pain, she twisted her neck to the side. In the burnished steel of the imager housing, she saw her own face, crimson rivulets spreading downward from the corners of each eye.

I'm crying blood? "What's happening to me, doctor?"

She felt a clammy pressure on her forehead as Dr. Gilman pressed her head back down onto the table. "Lie still, dear. Mustn't mess up the readings."

"I'm going to start the second stage. Remember, you'll feel some psychic dissociation; you've got to fight it with everything you've got."

Keep it together -- keep yourself together. You're Kristen Bauer. You're Kristen. You're Kristen . . . Kristen . . .

Repeating her name again and again, Kristen became aware of a cool sensation around her scalp. *No, it's deeper than my scalp -- must be something internal.* The cool sensation coiled around her head. *You're Kristen . . . but that thing in your head isn't . . . Kristen . . . Kristen . . .*

The cool tendrils wriggled and flopped inside her head. *It feels like they're coming out of my ears! And I can't feel my body anymore!*

Kristen tried to lift her head, but her neck refused to respond. She could feel her muscles tensing up, but her head didn't seem to move.

"How do you feel, Ms. Bauer?"

"I can't feel my body, and I can't move my head. Help me . . ."

"What's your name?"

"Kristen . . ." *Did I say that? Or did the thing in my head say it for me?*

"Excellent. Then it's time for the final stage. The stars are right, as they say."

A wet, wriggling explosion, a scream of pain, then a lurch as the examination table collapsed against newly created bulk. *I can move again, and I can see! There's Dr. Gilman, the imager, the hallway, the office . . . I can see it all -- see it all at once. And see myself. . .*

Pointing an eyestalk downward, she saw a mass of glistening tentacles, each uncoiling and tentatively waving in the air. Her other eyestalks whirled and swirled as she beheld the entire room in a single glance.

"What's your name?"

"I am Kristen Bauer. I am Thulykos. I am Shoggoth!"

Episode 7: Agnar on the Hunt

Twelve scientists in comas. Each of them working on the frontiers of medicine, chemistry, biology, that sort of thing. Each found sitting upright in bed by wives, roommates, children. Each otherwise healthy -- but their souls took one-way flights out of town. Twelve of the best and brightest gone for good, and I'm trying to figure out why.

There are two common threads. The first is the faces. Usually, when you see a soul-suck, you're looking at a vacancy. There's a glassy stare, limp body, and lots of drool. But these scientists had faces twisted with spite and hate. Their eyes didn't move -- didn't respond to stimulus -- but shone with hate that was almost palpable. I got the sensation that each one was about to say, "Shining a light in my eyes? How dare you!"

Ten bucks says there's something from the badness of the Great Beyond hatching in those skulls. But that's not my problem. I want to know where the souls went.

The second thread is the timing. They were all found June 15th. Twenty bucks says twelve souls departed our tidy little corner of the universe at precisely midnight on the 14th.

And now I've got a line on a thirteenth scientist -- one that vanished without a trace on the night of the 14th. And that's why I'm waiting for nightfall to subdue a guard and use his keycard to get into the east stairwell.

She wasn't one of the best and brightest -- yet. Bauer-comma-Kristen had perfect SATs, played varsity soccer, and assisted on some pretty significant neurobiological papers as an undergraduate. Lots of awards, loving family, the usual "small-town-girl-makes-good" stuff. I heard the word "potential" a lot whenever I mentioned her name.

Surreptitious interviews with friends, lab partners, and so on filled in that outline with some interesting colors, though: a boyfriend straight out of the Thug Hall of Fame and a shared interest in the recreational side of pharmaceutical research. Bauer's friends hinted that she was slipping. She wasn't sleeping much, the boyfriend started disappearing for days on end, and she started to make mistakes in her lab work.

I'm hidden near the entrance of that lab right now. According to the security computer, no one has permission to access the east stairwell. It doesn't even appear on the fire-escape maps. That's the investigational equivalent of a big red arrow, I figure.

The guard comes around the corner, and I do my pain thing. He accepts the mercy of unconsciousness, I've got his key card, and now I'm in the stairwell. There's a door to the roof, the ground-floor door I just came through, and a squared-off spiral staircase going down.

I assumed there'd be cameras, so I'm glad when the power goes off, right on schedule. I also assume there's something passive on the stair landings (ten bucks says vibration sensors), so I attach a line to the stair rail and ride the rope down into the darkness.

I'm at the bottom, through a locked door, and choking another guard into unconsciousness when the emergency lights come on. So the lab is bathed in red light -- and this lab doesn't need weird lighting to look creepy.

It's got everything you'd expect from a cutting-edge lab; there are exam tables, an MRI unit, computers, and all the chemistry glassware you'd expect: neat rows of test tubes and cabinets of carefully labeled vials. But it's got everything that people like me expect from an occult high priest: channels on the floor for blood collection, chalkboards with ancient Sumerian death-odes written on them, and winged fetuses pinned to boards on the wall. Candles are everywhere, and there's even an astronomical calendar on the wall -- how clichéd is that?

You are an intruder, but I welcome you, says the voice in my head. It doesn't really sound like anything, but it feels somehow oily -- like I've got something slippery that's squirming in my ear.

I scan the room, and I see a glass canister atop a desk. Suspended in fluid within the case, I see a dark shadow.

Nothing wrong with gambling at this point. And if you're gambling, you might as well bluff. "Whose brain am I speaking to?"

The fluid swirls, and a human brain swims near the front of the case, propelled by tentacles dangling where its spinal nerves should be. I am Vanaakath the Red Seer. You have a healthy body. Together we could achieve a great deal. . . .

How dumb does it think I am? "I'll pass. And your master wouldn't approve of you cutting a deal with me."

Gilman is blind to the power I offer! But you are no fanatic. Think of the earthly pleasures that could be ours. . . .

Ten seconds talking to the brain canister, and I've already got a name. This is easier than I thought.

But then it gets hard. The brain starts bombarding me with dark, pornographic images. It starts with run-of-the-mill slave girl stuff -- which explains the Sumerian on the blackboard -- but then it starts

getting twisted. The brain shifts the images so I get a first-person view, and naked flesh now surrounds me. It's an orgy of disembodied organs, blank-eyed corpses, and pulsating cyst-creatures I've never seen before.

Then the brain canister activates the pleasure centers in my head. My whole body starts to tingle. It's trying to get me to enjoy myself, and that's where I draw the line.

My pistol comes out of the shoulder holster. The first two rounds shatter the canister, and at least the next six hit the brain itself. I'm on the floor after that, trying to keep my own mind intact. But my hand keeps shooting until the gun is empty and I've got my head together.

I stand up and walk over -- I want to watch this thing flail around and die. And sure enough, it's thrashing weakly on the laboratory floor.

You're a fool, Agnar, just like Gilman. You fear the future . . . so much that you want to destroy everything . . . you could have had . . . a future of limitless power. . . .

"I'm no endbringer, brain. You were in my head, so you should know that."

I know a lot. I know how old you are, Agnar. And I know what you possess, but will not use. . . .

Then it thrashes once more and is still. I get the urge to kick it across the room, but I resist. You don't trust your own instincts for a while after something's been in your head. Instead, I begin the laborious part of my job. I start searching computer records, looking for anything about this "Gilman."

I'm adding you to the list, Dr. Gilman. Mark my words: Agnar likes the world just fine, and you don't get to end it all.

Episode 8: Agnar, Hunted

Agnar woke with a start. Something was in the hallway -- something with more than two feet. And it wasn't breathing.

Squinting into the darkness of the tenement room, Agnar checked for exits, then foes, then weapons. The door was locked, and the window was closed and fifty feet above the street below. No intruders hid in the shadows of the tiny room. His gun was under his pillow, already in his hand. His sword was in his duffel bag at the foot of the bed. The trumpet case was on the bed next to him.

Agnar tentatively lifted one leg, but grimaced and gently set it down when the creaking bedsprings announced his shifting weight. I'm stuck, unless I want to announce that I'm awake.

Unbroken light shone under the tenement door. When they step in front of the door, I'll see the shadows of their feet and get a second or two of warning. Two shots to the center of the door, then I grab the case, the duffel bag, then . . .

The light shining under the doorway gradually dimmed, then went out with a feeble flicker. Supernatural, then, thought Agnar. To hell with the bedsprings. Now!

Agnar was against the far wall, with the case and the bag in hand when the door broke into splinters. The city lights through the window revealed a bulky shape beyond. Then dozens of red eyes blinked into bright fury, limning a greenish gray mass of hooks and tentacles in a fiery glow.

The creature didn't enter the room so much as it extruded itself into it. Tentacles gripped the doorframe, then the mass wriggled inside, flailing eyestalks in every direction, illuminating the room with dozens of red flashlight beams.

A shoggoth, Agnar thought. Then he spied locks of long dark hair amid the tentacles and eyestalks. No, there's something else in there -- it's an abomination.

Agnar ducked as tentacles whipped over his head. The door is out of the question, which leaves the window. Holding bag and case in one hand, Agnar used the other to empty his gun into the abomination. Tentacles flexed in response, and Agnar found himself bathed in the red light of a dozen eyestalks.

Agnar dropped the useless gun, then tossed the bag and trumpet case away from the window. Most of the abomination's eyestalks followed, so Agnar leapt in the other direction. Three desperate steps brought Agnar to the window. Covering his face with one arm, he sprang out of the window, shattering the glass and twisting in midair. He scrabbled for the ledge with his other hand as his feet whipped over his head. Barbed tentacles stabbed at empty air in the middle of the window frame.

A painful yank on every joint of his arm told Agnar that he'd found a grip on the windowsill. Then he uncovered his face to see more tentacles flapping through the window. With a roar and the tinkling of more glass, the abomination wriggled through the window, leaping into midair in pursuit of Agnar. Even as it fell to the street below, several eyestalks turned to illuminate Agnar, hanging outside the window by one hand.

The tentacle-beast landed on the sidewalk with a wet slap. Its tentacles lolled out, and a wine-red pool of blood grew beneath it. But then the tentacles flexed themselves tentatively and the eyestalks all gazed upward.

A five-story drop didn't do it, Agnar thought. Humans just don't beat abominations. But I won't die easy. He hoisted himself back in through the window. Ignoring the bleeding from the glass cuts, he grabbed the broadsword from the duffel bag and the trumpet case by its handle.

Seconds later, the first tentacle curled around the windowsill, followed by an eyestalk that lit the room in baleful red. Agnar heard screams from the street outside. At least I can get people away from the building. Agnar waited until most of the abomination's bulk was accumulating outside the window frame, then he dashed across the room, dodging more tentacles as he made for the hallway. Find a fire alarm!

The first tentacle constricted around Agnar's ankle as he turned the corner in the hallway, within sight of the red pull-handle of the fire alarm. He felt a gentle tug backward, as if the creature was testing the strength of what it had caught. Then the tug became a constant pull, and Agnar charged forward with all the might in his other leg, trying to reach the far end of the hallway. He hugged a fire extinguisher box in the hallway with both arms as the tentacle pulled harder and harder.

My grip is slipping -- I can't outmuscle even one tentacle. Agnar suddenly let go and allowed himself to be pulled back down the hallway. Then he wrenched his captured leg up and slashed his sword just above it. Three more hacks from the sword, and the tentacle detached, spraying purple ichor across the hallway walls. Agnar got up and ran, pulling the handle on the fire alarm. Six more tentacles and an eyestalk emerged from Agnar's room, slithering like snakes down the hallway. Everyone evacuating will use the stairs, so I'll use the elevator. I want it to know where I'm going.

Agnar grabbed the trumpet case and staggered to the elevator, one foot flopping uselessly on the end of his leg. Some sort of paralytic poison. I can feel a tingle from the foot, but nothing else, Agnar thought. Well, I'll be dead before it paralyzes me completely.

Agnar pushed the basement button. As the elevator began its achingly slow descent, he gave himself the once over. Minor lacerations from the glass, plus the paralysis in the lower leg. I'm bleeding like a stuck pig, but that's good -- I'm leaving an easy trail to follow.

Reaching the basement, Agnar hit the emergency stop on the elevator. I'll leave it down here so the tentacle thing absolutely knows where I've gone. He limped into a spider web of steam-pipes and heating ducts. The boiler room. Good place for a last stand.

Spying a mallet, Agnar dropped his sword and started hunting around the room, smashing whatever valves he could find and twisting every wheel into the off position. All that heat with nowhere to go. The dials on the tenement building's boiler slowly began to quiver upward.

Then the steel stairway door flew across the room and tentacles went everywhere. Agnar tried to leap and dodge, but his ankle gave way with a pop that Agnar could hear but not feel. Tentacles wrapped around his limbs, then his torso, then his neck. Across his body, Agnar could feel the cool, tingling of the poison, like gasoline evaporating on his skin. Then the tentacles started squeezing as the abomination's bulk drew near.

The red eyestalks hovered over Agnar, examining him from all angles. Then one thick tentacle emerged from the wriggling mass, the distorted face of a woman carried on its tip. Kristen Bauer! Agnar thought.

Like a mask, the skin of the face and the hair on her scalp were all that remained. As Agnar watched, wormlike tentacles slithered out of the face's eyeholes.

The face spoke. "Dr. Gilman said you were looking for me. He says you should enjoy the irony of your success being directly responsible for your death. But how's it going to happen? Shall I let the ichor do its work and wait until your paralyzed lungs stop breathing? I can grow teeth -- should this be a bloodletting? Or shall I just squeeze?"

Agnar tried to speak, but found himself gasping for air. The fingers of one hand tried to work the latch on the trumpet case, but then they too started tingling, and Agnar could only flex them feebly.

"What's in the case, Agnar? Obviously not a trumpet. Another gun, perhaps?" Agnar vaguely felt the case wrested from his grasp. No!

Small tentacles flipped open the latch. "Oh, Dr. Gilman can definitely use . . ."

The shrill whistle drowned out the abomination's words. Then the whistle became a scream, then a roar as the boiler exploded. Agnar felt himself lifted and buffeted as everything went hot and white.

Before falling unconscious, Agnar had time for one more thought. I wonder if the Gjallerhorn can survive a brick building falling on it.

Episode 9: The High Cost of Failure

"If you didn't find a body, then he's not dead yet." Dr. Gilman paced in front of his desk. "This 'Agnar' has plagued me for months. You reported him dead last week. Now I have an intruder somewhere in the hospital, and my security expert tells me Agnar might not be dead after all?"

"The entire building collapsed after the explosion! You can't expect me to believe . . ."

"Haroldson," said Dr. Gilman gently, taking a syringe from the desk. "This Agnar is clearly more than he seems. He destroyed my abomination, and mortals just don't do that. It's a virtue to be thorough, and you weren't thorough. How do you suppose I should punish this failure?"

Haroldson eyed the syringe, swallowed hard, and said, "Um . . . Don't deal with me until you've taken care of the intruder, doctor."

"Clever Haroldson, trying to buy yourself time. Well, your little gambit worked -- follow me to the breeding chamber. We'll observe the progress of our intruder from there." Gilman gestured casually with the syringe. "I'll have you unshackled. But if you get disruptive, I'll have to . . . medicate you."

Gilman put on his white lab coat and latex gloves as a thick-necked orderly emerged from the hallway and unlocked Haroldson's shackles. Pocketing the syringe, Gilman strode down the corridor, followed closely by his captive.

The hospital technicians and orderlies knew better than to stare, but everyone noticed the contrast between the pair. Gilman was angular, thin, bald, and walked straight forward, never glancing sideways or back. Haroldson was paunchy, bearded, and panting, sweat beading on his brow as he glanced into every doorway he passed and every hallway they crossed.

The pair went down a service elevator, with Haroldson's eyes widening briefly as the red letters on the floor display descended below the basement level: -1... -2... -3. The elevator stopped with a lurch.

A wave of hot, wet air rushed into the elevator as soon as the doors opened. "Turn left and go to the end of the hallway, Haroldson," Gilman said. "I'll join you shortly."

Haroldson turned around, but Dr. Gilman was gone. Clapping a meaty hand on his tingling neck, he half-tiptoed, half-scurried down the hallway.

A blue glow limned the computers and medical equipment crammed into the cavelike room at the end of the corridor. In the center was a glass cylinder that stretched from floor to ceiling, full of greenish syrup and air bubbles that rose slowly and popped with wet, slow-motion explosions. In the center of the tank, Haroldson could see a dark, oval mass at least 10 feet across.

A voice from behind him echoed across the chamber. "Pupation will be complete in another hour. If we haven't resolved the intruder situation by then, perhaps my new creation will take care of matters for us."

Haroldson whipped his head around, but didn't see the source of the voice. But when he turned back toward the tank, the doctor was there, caressing the tank with one hand and pressing his ear to the glass.

"It's in a chrysalis, but it can see and hear us. In fact, its senses already reach far beyond our own. Pull up the security cameras, Haroldson, and tell me what you see."

Haroldson sat down at a work station, relieved to be doing something. "Normal . . . normal . . . normal . . . wait. Fourth floor corridor; there's something spilled on the floor. I'm zooming in."

The voice, vaguely female, was felt rather than heard, as if every object in the chamber was vibrating to produce the sound. "The blond man, master. He slays those whom you have marked, then hides the bodies. But the bodies bleed, master. The bodies bleed."

Haroldson forced himself not to turn his head back toward the tank, typing commands on the keyboard even faster.

"You see, Haroldson, its senses are remarkable! You should be proud. Some of your . . . procurements are important ingredients in my finest creation."

Haroldson's computer screen started to light up with blinking warnings. "Doctor, the intruder has disabled the locks on door 4-dash-70. I'm gassing room 70." Haroldson furiously typed a string of commands.

Ominous silence filled the chamber. Haroldson risked a look back. Gilman had clambered atop the tank and thrown open the hatch. He dipped a flask into the syrupy substance, then held it up to the light.

The vibrating voice returned. "Master, the blond man lives. He's turning off the machines, one by one."

Gilman shouted, "Get me some time, Haroldson! It's no exaggeration to say that your life depends on it, one way or the other!"

Haroldson stared at the building schematic on the computer screen. "Okay, I'm sending all security squads to the basement above us. That's 24, wait, 32 men, and they'll shoot to kill. If they go down, I can detonate explosives on all three elevator shafts once I see an elevator move. That'll trap us down here for a while, but that's not an insurmountable problem."

"I hope you succeed, Haroldson."

Haroldson wiped his brow frequently during another long pause that followed, staring at the computer screen. Gilman collected more of the tank fluid with an eyedropper and brought it down to a centrifuge on a nearby table.

"Master," the voice boomed. "The blond man is slaying again. Blood is spilling on the floor. They seek him, but he's too stealthy and clever." Then a pause. "Master, the blond man is tricking the soldiers into shooting each other." Haroldson started to click through windows on the computer screen blindly, trying to look busy.

Another pause. "Master, the surviving soldiers are regrouping. But the blond man has grenades. He's slaying them . . . they're all dead now."

"Time, Haroldson! I need time!"

Haroldson barely heard Gilman's voice. He stared at the elevator icons on the computer screen, his finger poised above the mouse button. One elevator flashed, and click, click, click -- Haroldson gave the command to destroy the elevators.

One roar and a shiver in the floor. A second roar and shiver. Then another interminable pause.

"Master, the blond man is descending in the third elevator."

Haroldson felt a sharp prick in the back of his neck, then a cold wave of dizziness overtook him. As he slumped out of the chair and onto the floor, he looked up at Dr. Gilman holding the syringe in one hand and an eyedropper in the other.

"There's one last way you can buy me time, Haroldson. The emergence process for my creation will go quicker if there's a little more carbon in the suspension fluid. Did you know that your body has 36 pounds of carbon in it, Haroldson?"

Episode 10: Doing Viktor's Bidding

"After a brief break, we will have lot number four hundred one. Recently unearthed and painstakingly reassembled after a . . . violent situation in Mozambique, an antiquity that resonates with power: the Antikythera Mechanism.

"Bidding starts in five minutes at one million American dollars. Equivalent sanguinal currencies gladly accepted."

From the back of the dimly lit auction house, Viktor grinned. It seems I've arrived just in time.

He scanned the neat rows of chairs, looking for a vacant seat. To his left he noticed two shaven-headed priests of the Tibetan demon-prince, Pekhar. Potentially dangerous someday, Viktor thought, but they don't have the resources to even be here. They must be sellers of a lot that comes up later.

Directly in front of him was a serpentine aztec, slowly fanning itself with the feathers on its head-crest. Clearly here as a proxy for someone else. I wonder whom? Next to the aztec was an immensely fat wendigo taking up two chairs (clearly prospering under the curse, Viktor thought) and a Norse fire-demon (useless in a situation like this).

To the left was an assortment of humans from all walks of life, peppered with the occasional vampire, leech-man, or devilish half-breed. And near the front, an empty seat. Or two actually -- one on either side of . . . is that Neferhe?

The dark-skinned woman sat with regal posture in the front row, her purple robes spilling onto the chairs on either side of her. Spiraling ropes of gold snaked through her raven hair. As Viktor walked across the row to her, he noticed a round clay medallion on her chest, stamped with the image of a single unblinking eye.

"Neferhe."

"Viktor." The woman gathered her robes about her to make room.

"The Eye of Horus? I always figured it would be made of gold," Viktor said as he sat down.

Neferhe paused, then gently fingered the amulet at her breast. "My father learned that wet clay has certain absorptive qualities that gold does not. I heard that you took out Minerva, Viktor."

Word travels fast. "Sort of. She was working with a shaman named Xihouto, and between them they'd made surprising progress. But they had a rather violent falling out, and I arrived just in time to sweep up the pieces."

"Any . . . valuable pieces?"

"I've got nothing up for auction today, if that's what you mean."

The red curtains parted behind the auctioneer's lectern, and a cadaverous creature in a tuxedo stepped out. In his bony hands were a silver tray, upon which was a bronze box covered with dials spinning with lurches and clicks. Tiny doors on all surfaces of the box opened and closed with a rhythm of their own, revealing whirring gears.

Pinpoints of red winked into life in the cadaver-creature's eye sockets as it intoned: "Lot number four hundred one. The Antikythera Mechanism. Bidding starts at one million."

I could be coy, but I might as well see who's here to play. "One million, Mikaelius."

The cadaver repeated the bid. "One million. Hear I two million?"

Neferhe raised a slim hand. "Two million." Then she turned toward Viktor, smiling. "I didn't realize you were interested in antiques, Viktor."

Don't you arch that eyebrow at me, lady. "Three million."

"Four," said Neferhe before Mikaelius had a chance to acknowledge Viktor's bid.

She's eager -- or she's making a big show of being eager. Either case: Why? Viktor paused, nodding to Neferhe with a tight smile on his face as Mikaelius intoned, "Four million. Hear I five?"

Then a voice came from the back of the room, utterly flat and devoid of inflection, as if it intentionally carried no meaning beyond its words.

"Eight million."

Mikaelius's face had long since lost the ability to show surprise, but his voice quavered slightly as he said, "Eight million, then."

Neferhe turned to Viktor. "Omega?"

"Probably. Perhaps Gilman, but probably Omega." I wonder if she knows about Gilman. If not, it'll give her something else to think about.

Viktor cleared his throat. "As I was saying, Mikaelius, nine million."

"Ten million!" said Neferhe, her voice almost rising to a shout.

She's either forgotten herself completely, or she's really overacting. But I'm in an awkward position. The fact that she wants it makes it more valuable to me, if only to keep it out of her hands.

Viktor and Neferhe both paused for a beat, waiting to hear from the voice in the back of the auction hall. When no voice emerged, Viktor ran his hand through his hair and said, "Eleven million, if you please."

Neferhe paused. "You're getting to be an expensive acquaintance, Viktor. Twelve million, Mikaelius."

This is starting to cost real money. "Thirteen million." Viktor wasn't even looking at the auctioneer anymore. Turned halfway in his seat, he stared Neferhe directly in the eyes, his jaw set and teeth clenched.

Neferhe bowed her head, her eyes closed. "Going once . . . going twice . . . sold at thirteen million. Please make arrangements at the business office before the auction ends."

Viktor rose from his seat. "The Antikythera Mechanism is the only thing here I wanted, Neferhe," he said.

"Of course. You're blind to many things Viktor, but you recognize power for what it is. Perhaps when we meet again, we'll bid for it using . . . other currencies."

"One never knows, Neferhe. Until the end of the world, then?"

"Until the end of the world, Viktor."

Viktor slid down the row to the aisle, making his way up the stairs to the exit. As he did, Neferhe leaned forward from her front-row seat. Mikaelius the auctioneer was lifting the tray and turning to disappear behind the curtain.

Neferhe gripped the amulet at her breast as hard as she could. "Mikaelius, old friend, won't you tell me where Viktor tells you to deliver the Antikythera Mechanism?"

Episode 11: Adding to Agnar's List

This whole operation depends on me getting down into the basement labs before Dr. Gilman finishes growing a new abomination. And because his hands are up in the air and my gun is pointing right at him, I think it's safe to say it worked.

"Away from the tank, Gilman." I can see something floating behind him in a massive tank full of sludge, and I'd rather not be around when it decides to leave that tank. Gilman complies, shuffling toward a desk covered with computers.

Then there's a voice in my head: "Master, the blond man is about to . . ." It doesn't get any further than that because I toss a grenade into the tank, then another. There's still a mass in the center of the tank, but now there's a lot of chum whirling in the greenish fluid. That ought to shut it up.

My ears are ringing, but I can hear Gilman's nasal, pleading voice. "Agnar, I can make you wealthy . . . or powerful. Whichever of my rivals sent you, I assure you I'm more reasonable than they are. And you have me at a disadvantage -- enrich yourself! Once you pull that trigger, I have no value to you." Gilman's eyes are wide, darting back and forth between the tank and the door behind me. He's looking for an exit and hoping that his abomination will wake up and slaughter me.

Which it would. Humans, even in numbers, even with explosives, just don't beat abominations. It doesn't happen.

Except I did beat Gilman's abomination a few weeks ago -- in a situation where even I would have bet against me. That's why I had to pull a risky commando raid on Gilman's labs -- I wanted to get here before he had time to grow a new monster.

"None of your rivals sent me, Gilman."

"How can you be so sure? They're subtle creatures, Agnar. Some of them are thousands of years old, and others have made pacts with evil forces that can cloud your mind."

I laugh. "I'm older than I look, Gilman. And I know what you're up to. You don't get to end the world. Nobody does until I say so."

But then my laughter cuts short. I feel the vibration of a pager at my waist. I dropped sensors all along my path, and they're starting to detect someone else in the building above us. I left only dead bodies up there. And it's not the police -- I'd have heard the radio chatter on my headset.

Ten bucks says it's another endbringer -- or at least an abomination.

Gilman again -- he's loudly protesting that he wants to end the world. How dumb does he think I am?

I cover the space between us in three strides and throw a forearm across his neck as he sprawls onto a desk. The pistol barrel is against his nose as I say, "Not ending the world, Gilman?"

Using the business end of the pistol, I hunt-and-peck a password on the desk computer next to Gilman's head. With a blink, up come the schematics for a summoning ritual. For the big guy himself: Cthulhu.

"Cthulhu doesn't do the little stuff, Gilman. You know that, and I know that."

I want to continue this, because Gilman could probably tell me a lot about the other endbringers. But my pager is vibrating so hard that it's emitting an audible buzz. And I'm not exactly blind to the motion in the tank behind me. Time to cut this short.

"One of your endbringer rivals is picking through the wreckage upstairs, Gilman. Part of me wants to just step back, let you two duke it out with your abominations, and maybe pick off the weakened winner.

"But that part just got outvoted by the sensible part of me."

Two shots to Gilman's head, and he's done. Another bullet to the computer, just because I get a vicarious thrill out of shooting Cthulhu. Two more grenades go into the tank, and then I'm up the elevator -- I don't want to get trapped down here. Once the elevator reaches ground level, a satchel charge wrecks it well enough that the rival endbringer up here won't get access to Gilman's research -- or whatever was growing in that tank down there.

Tonight, I'll get to cross Gilman's name off my list. But part of me wonders which endbringer is rooting around up here.

I should make my escape, but the sensible part of me gets outvoted. I want to see who else was gunning for Dr. Gilman. So I creep down the hallway and up a stairwell. Now I'm in the hospital's public basement.

Janitorial? Nothing. Physical Plant? Sporadic trails of some kind of ichor, but otherwise nothing. That tells me I'm probably stalking an abomination, and the sensible part of me is screaming to get out.

I round the corner and see the morgue. Of course. Where else would my quarry be?

With as much stealth as I can muster, I creep down the corridor toward the swinging doors that mark the morgue entrance. Gun in hand (like that'll help), I peek a sliver of my head against the window.

There's an abomination there, all right. This one's about 10 feet tall, gorilla shaped, with elephantine tusks. And it has sores all over its body that emit scurrying cockroaches and the pus that I found on the floor.

But that abomination isn't alone. It stands watch over a dark-skinned woman dressed like an Egyptian pharaoh. She's pulling back a drawer in the morgue, pinching open the mouth of the body inside, and feeding it a black snake.

Then the corpse sits up as its skin flushes with color. "Neferhe, my queen," the zombie croaks.

I've heard enough. I'm running down the corridor, trusting that the grenades I scatter in my wake will keep the gorilla-abomination from catching me.

I've got a new name, "Neferhe," for my list of endbringers. And it's time to brush up on countermeasures for ancient Egyptian necromancy.

Episode 12: Viktor's Castle Burns

I awaken to the sound of screams. Someone is attacking Master Viktor's castle, and they're slaughtering all the guards and worshipers in the servants' quarters below. Lucky for Master Viktor that I'm here to take care of this intrusion. Tamnnis the Dreamer craves battle, and I haven't had a good battle since we got back from Peru.

I slither out of my nest and press my claws against the ancient stone of the keep. I can sense it below me: a vital, jumpy spot amid the background tumult of sensation. It's another abomination, and a powerful one at that.

A grin spreads across my wide mouth, and I snap my jaw in anticipation. When Master Viktor returns from his trip, I can present him with the intruder's head and say, "Look what Tamnnis has done, master, all for your greater glory!"

(Of course I'll consume the rest of it, other than the head. I'm not beyond keeping a little pleasure for myself.)

I start creeping downstairs, trying to dampen my own sorcerous energies. I want the element of surprise. It probably thinks it faces only mortal opposition. But I've already consumed five abominations for the greater glory of Master Viktor -- and my personal pleasure.

There was the byakhee in New Orleans -- my first and toughest battle to date. Then the slimoid nahual down in Mexico, which was a tough foe but easy to outwit. And the vitiosus/eviscerator abomination in the Paris sewer tunnels. I think it would have begged for mercy at the end if its mouths were still working.

The carnival trip netted me the twinned husk that Minerva created. And in Peru, I defeated a mecatl with some help from Master Viktor. And because the mecatl had just killed another one of Minerva's abominations, a merging of Feculus and Glotra, I got to consume that one, too.

That's actually six abominations; I'm getting to be quite the gourmet. And I can sense a seventh meal beyond me in the courtyard. The guards are using guns now from the upper windows. It doesn't sound like

it's working -- if a gun works, you can stop shooting it. But mortals tend to keep firing their guns if they don't work. I'm not sure why.

I peer out a lower window, and I stop breathing when I see the monstrous beauty of the abomination before me. It almost hurts my eyes to look at it. It's too terribly wonderful to look at all at once.

But I can focus on parts of it. Its head is obscenely large, with black fur stretched too tightly across the bones of its skull. Curving tusks on either side of its toothy mouth drip gore.

The torso is all thick slabs of muscle under wrinkled gray skin, but the amazing thing is the red scars scattered across its entire body. As I watch, horrid cockroaches crawl out of the wounds, scurry across the abomination's body, then disappear into other wounds. The part of me that used to be Ebriel the Hunter recognizes a fellow demon, one known as "The Butcher." It's good to be part demon -- it's like you're always seeing family members running around out there.

And the abomination's overall shape is simian and twice as tall as me. Its arms look like they could crush me with ease, assuming I can avoid its sharp tusks. And who knows what those roaches do? I silently thank Master Viktor for expunging fear from me, and I grin in anticipation. This will be tougher than the byakhee, to be certain.

Down the corridor, I see four guards massing near a door, ready to burst into the courtyard. Whether they're going to attack or try to escape, I'm not sure. But they give me an opportunity, so I shift my form into something innocuous and human, grab a fire axe from the wall, and join them. It's good to be a shapeshifter.

We're out into the bright sun of the courtyard, and the butcher-abomination spears one human with each tusk. I see the ivory spikes emerge from their backs in a spray of blood, then the abomination rises onto its hind legs and shakes its head, flinging the humans into the courtyard walls. I'm impressed enough to watch as the bodies hit the walls with a wet slap, then leave a red splash on the wall and a bloody trail down to the ground.

Two more humans, then me. The butcher's arms come out, snatch up the humans like playthings, then hold them aloft. It pauses long enough to let them scream, then claps its hands, smashing them together. A gory tangle of limbs falls to the ground, then it charges me.

I move enough to the side that its tusks won't kill me, then shift back to my crocodilian form and leap on its back as it rushes past. It crashes into the castle wall, and my jaws are around its neck. I can taste the stinging heat of demon blood, plus a dozen scents and tastes I don't immediately recognize. My teeth are burrowing deeper into the cords of muscle around its spine, and the blood is spilling out of my mouth and down my chest. This battle might not be as hard as I thought.

And that's when the butcher's skin erupts as hundreds of cockroaches leap out of every sorelike orifice on the abomination's massive frame. They're biting me, and I feel a cool numbness everywhere their tiny mouths feed. They're stealing my strength; a wave of dizziness almost knocks me off the butcher's back.

There's a low rumble from the butcher -- a laugh, perhaps -- and then it whips its back around so fast that I lose my grip and go tumbling into the courtyard. The cockroaches chase after me, a wriggling carpet of brown. So I start climbing the walls of the castle by using my claws to dig holds in the crumbling granite of the castle walls. I'm a faster climber than a cockroach, so I reach the main building's roof in seconds despite the numbness that I'm now feeling in my joints and deep in my bones.

The roof creaks below me as I scurry onto it and look below me. The cockroaches retreat back into the butcher, who moves to a corner of the courtyard and starts climbing. It doesn't climb as well as I do, but it makes steady progress. I summon the last of my sorcerous strength as it reaches the roof opposite me, but it's a pittance. I can't beat this terrible, wonderful creature; I'm just not strong enough. But I think I'm smarter than it is, so I might still please Master Viktor one last time.

I leap up to the base of the north tower, which is a narrow minaret stretching above me, and start climbing. It clambers across the roof to chase me, then starts to ascend.

I reach the conical roof of the north tower, but it's too steep to stand on. I crawl around to the far side and wait, my claws flat against the shingles.

I notice the vibration, faint and tremulous, when the butcher is about halfway up the other side of the tower. The tower is swaying as the abomination climbs, and I can feel the creaking of the timbers and the grind of stone on stone. There's a rhythm to the sway that matches the pace of the butcher's climb.

His arms reach the edge of the roof, and I make my move. I leap over the roof and onto his back. I've subtracted my weight from one side of the tower, then added my weight -- with interest thanks to gravity -- to the other side. The butcher is much heavier than I am, and my impact is enough of a surprise that it loses a grip with one arm, swinging out from the tower while I desperately cling to its back. Then some stones give way and we're falling.

I see the red shingles of the roof rushing toward us below. In a fraction of a moment, we'll hit them and punch right through the roof. We'll probably crash through the next floor, too, landing in one of Master Viktor's laboratories.

We're abominations, so the fall won't kill us. And even if we land on something caustic, poisonous, or aflame in the laboratory, that won't kill us either.

But my last conscious act is to twist my neck and look up at the sky. Above me I see tons of stone -- the collapsing mass of the north tower, its stones following us earthward.

That should do the trick. I hope Master Viktor will be pleased.

Episode 13: Viktor, Meet Agnar

Telling the others to rest for a minute, Viktor waved his hands and muttered a few syllables in Corrupt Etruscan. He winced against a brief wave of dizziness as the ancient magic expanded his perceptions. The dizziness passed, and Viktor could see himself far below, a tiny figure in the vast jungle. The trail wound among a series of low hills and long, straight ridges. *It's all invisible from the trail, thought Viktor, but from up here you can see the spine and the wing-bones. And it looks like we have only another mile or two to go.*

"Take some water, my children, then we'll hike some more," Viktor told the others on the trail. The teenagers traveling with Viktor unslung their backpacks and got out snacks and water, chatting amiably among themselves. Viktor stood apart, studying his fellow travelers from his aerial perspective. *They seem fit and in good spirits. Ah, the resilience of youth.*

Viktor and his charges had traveled far over the last month. Two hundred volunteers from high schools and colleges headed into the New Mexico mountains to unearth the Ixecudor of Ymog. Then Viktor took

them to the desert ruins of Petra to conjure a screaming star-spawn. Now a dozen survivors had come with him to Brazil.

Viktor ordered the youths to don their backpacks and resume the march. After another hour on the trail, Viktor halted the hikers again. "Machetes, my children. And you won't need your backpacks anymore," he said. Grinning, the youths rifled through their packs for their sharp blades, drew them, then started hacking a path in the direction Viktor pointed. *Such enthusiasm. Oh, to be a true believer again.*

Twenty minutes of hard work carved a path to the serpentine ridge hidden behind the jungle vegetation. "This is it, my children. Get out your candles, then climb the ridge," Viktor said. As the teenagers sprinted up the ridge, Viktor broke into a run to keep pace. Just as they'd practiced countless times, they arranged themselves in a circle, then began to sing as they lit their candles, one by one. Their song was a wordless cry, deliberately discordant and confusing. Viktor permitted himself a smile of satisfaction. The song's discordance would draw out his quarry within minutes.

When the song finished, Viktor spoke to the singers. "Well done, my children! Raise your candles high, and prepare your minds to meet eternity!"

A voice rose from beyond the far side of the ridge. "Meet eternity? That's a pretty obvious euphemism, don't you think?"

Viktor whipped his head around to see a blond-haired man stride over the ridgeline to stand near the circle of teenagers. One beefy arm hung casually from the shotgun slung over his shoulder. A few of the youths turned to look at the newcomer, anger in their eyes, but most continued to stare at the candles they held aloft.

"Good afternoon, Viktor."

Viktor narrowed his eyes and nodded curtly. "Agnar."

"I'm surprised you'd travel so . . . unprotected. No abomination today?"

He's right, but I'm not answering that one. "The reason you're here, Agnar?"

"You don't get to end the world, Viktor. No one does."

And with that gun, Agnar could make sure of it, Viktor thought. *There's no way I can nail him with sorcery before he gets a shot off.*

"And you're going to stop me? Like you stopped Gilman?" *Lead him a little . . .*

"Exactly."

"Like you stopped Neferhe?" *I'll bet he knows who Neferhe is by now.*

"Neferhe, well . . ."

"Or like you stopped Minerva and Xihouto?"

"That was you, not me."

Now I flip it around. "That's my point, Agnar. I'm doing your job for you. I stopped Minerva and Xihouto. I know what Neferhe's up to, and that's why I'm trying to create a new abomination. I'm going to stop her next.

"If you kill me, I can't tell you about the endbringer who worries me more than Neferhe." *It's a bit of a gamble, but I bet he doesn't know about Omega yet.*

Agnar paused, staring hard at Viktor. "Nice try, Viktor. But Gilman used the same 'keep me alive' line, and it didn't work. First, let's ruin this ritual."

Agnar yanked the shotgun from his shoulder, held it to the head of one of the teenagers, and pulled the trigger. The teen's head exploded in a pink mist, and the shotgun roar echoed through the jungle.

Viktor suppressed a grim smile as the other youths flinched but kept staring at their candles. *Keep him talking.*

"You've brainwashed yourself some committed fanatics, Viktor," Agnar said. With a boom, he shot another teen.

"They aren't brainwashed, Agnar. They know they have a small but important role in making the world end, and they're pretty rational about it. You of all people should be able to relate."

Agnar aimed at a third teen, but then lowered the shotgun a few inches. "Me of all people?"

Wait . . . that means he doesn't know. "Ever wonder about the horn you always carry, Agnar? No matter what happens, it somehow always finds its way back to you, doesn't it? Ever wonder why you don't get old but everyone else does? Ever wonder why you run around the world chasing down endbringers?"

Agnar raised the shotgun again, this time pointing at Viktor. "You know about the Gjallerhorn?"

"I know more about it than you do, Agnar."

Viktor paused. *Let him come to me.*

Agnar sighed, then lowered the gun. "For five hundred years, I've had this horn. I've buried it, I've dropped it in the ocean, I've locked it in vaults, but it always shows up a few days later. You know why the Gjallerhorn and I seem to be immortal?"

"I have exactly one reason to keep what I know secret: The fact that you're shooting my cultists," Viktor replied.

Agnar threw his head back with a short, sharp laugh. "Okay, Viktor. You tell me what the Gjallerhorn does and give me another endbringer to chase. I leave you alone to make your monster and chase down Neferhe. Deal?"

"Deal."

"But that's as far as the deal goes. If our paths cross again, if you persist in trying to end the world . . ."

"I'd expect nothing less, Agnar."

"So what does the Gjallerhorn do?"

"It's pretty simple, Agnar. If you blow it, the world ends."

Episode 14: The Coils of Set

The full moon shone over the Sahara Desert, limning the figures scurrying across the sand in a thin, pearlescent glow. Narrow strips of cloud ribboned the sky, but swirled away from the moon as if afraid to interrupt the moonlight and mar the sand dunes with shadows.

Neferhe took a moment to savor the soft illumination of the moon. A thousand lovers are gazing up at that moon. But none of them know that it's the last full moon they'll ever see.

From her perch on a rock outcropping, Neferhe regarded her minions below. Oblivious to the moon's glow, they moved obelisks into place across the desert floor, chanting as they did so. Whip-wielding overseers -- priests chosen personally by Neferhe -- ensured that each obelisk fit perfectly into its ancient pattern on the desert floor.

It's different from last time, Neferhe thought. I never would have imagined using electronic contrivances -- GPS units -- to position the obelisks. My father had nothing but paces for measurement and the stars for direction.

But that was thousands of years ago, Neferhe reminded herself. She remembered herself as a young girl, precocious in the priestly arts, when her father the pharaoh stood on this very outcropping and directed slaves to place the obelisks in the profane, looping spiral. She remembered the shakiness in his hands and the quaver in his voice as the ritual began. Signs of weakness I'd never seen before. But once I saw them, I knew I had to act.

Neferhe remembered her slim, wavy dagger sliding across his throat as he knelt. She recalled how it had slipped between tendons, then poked redly from the side of his neck. The priests had started screaming, and a sandstorm began seconds later. Khufu Ashpanutet, loyal Khufu, he whisked me away. Then he buried me deep, and I slept until the stars would be right again.

With shouts from the cultists, the last obelisk was moved into place, then tilted upright. The capstones on each obelisk began to glow a deep red, scattering firefly motes of light across the desert sands. With a wave, Neferhe bid the priestesses forward to the base of the outcropping, then intoned: "Let the scaly darkness be given presence in this place. Let black coils choke all that is weak and poison with pain all that is pure. Let the Ancient One, Set, come forth and feast on a world stricken with rot and ruin!"

It's started now. And you'd be proud of me, father. My hands aren't shaking.

White-robed priestesses shuffled forward in pairs as chants rose up from the cluster of cultists encircling each obelisk. In unison each lifted a razor-sharp dagger in her right hand, then cut open the left eyelid of her partner. Blood streamed down each left cheek, but the right side of each priestly face remained moon-white.

Neferhe smiled, then gripped her own wavy bladed dagger. It'll be my turn soon. But tonight we listen to the chant and revel in Set's presence in the world.

She gave an involuntary shiver as she briefly sensed a flicker across her skin. Then, firmer, she felt a scaly caress around her thigh. Some of her minions were sprawling across the desert sands, wrestling with unseen foes. It's strongest here, but tonight Set's presence will be made known across the world.

Over the course of the next several hours, Neferhe extended her sorcerous perception across the globe, flitting across the electronic ether, looking for signs of Set's presence.

Bomb blasts rocked Damascus and Baghdad, destroying mosques and killing hundreds . . .

Freak tornadoes ripped through southern Illinois, tearing the roof off an elementary school and baffling meteorologists . . .

With the thunder of artillery, Pakistani troops crossed the border into disputed Kashmir this morning in a surprise attack . . .

The Aeolian Towers skyscraper in downtown Detroit collapsed without warning this afternoon . . .

Typhoon Gil abruptly changed course today, threatening . . .

. . . Sudden virulent plague . . .

. . . Earthquakes destroyed the capital . . .

. . . Suicide bombers . . .

. . . Mob violence . . .

Neferhe joined the chant, holding her hands in front of her face. Still no shaking. With Set's presence, I can't be stopped now.

Then a dark cloud clipped a corner of the moon, casting a pall over the writhing, chanting cultists and the red-tipped obelisks.

Neferhe looked upward. Why are the clouds not obeying me? With a sorcerous thought, she directed her dragon-demon abomination to emerge from its sandy tomb and scour the desert for intruders.

Episode 15: Pharaoh's Folly

Kneeling in the desert sands, Viktor decided he was having a very bad night. The wave of riots, terrorism, and wars that had spread across the globe in last few hours were disrupting or swallowing whole his various cults. A rival endbringer, the ancient Egyptian Neferhe, was in the process of making her god, Set, manifest in the real world. If she succeeded, the world would descend into chaos and barbarism, wiping away every technological and societal advance and causing all of humankind to revert to savagery.

And that's not the bad part, Viktor thought. Wrecking the world is just the prologue to destroying it completely, which will happen in short order if I don't stop her.

Viktor regarded the spiraling network of obelisks that dotted the Saharan desert. Each obelisk had white-robed priests surrounding it, some chanting and some writhing on the desert sands -- whether in agony or ecstasy, Viktor couldn't tell.

Viktor turned to the hulking figure behind him. A black creature of fang, feather, and tentacle, it floated a few feet above the desert floor, its tendrils leaving lazy curlicues in the sand. "My star-spawn, the time has come for you to hunt. Consume the minions, but leave the obelisks alone for now. Neferhe will falter if she feels the chant weaken."

The star-spawn's reply was a profane croak, syllables of gibberish that Viktor felt thumping in his chest more than he heard. Then it began to glide across the Saharan sands, hovering within each dune shadow in turn.

Viktor called after it. "You'll find soldiers guarding the outermost obelisks, but they are no danger to you. But my enemy undoubtedly has an abomination or two of her own in the desert sands, so beware!"

With a quick incantation and a wave of his hands, Viktor refocused his perceptions at a point in the sky far above the obelisk network. From this eldritch vantage point, he could see his abomination floating toward soldiers dug in among the dunes.

The abomination rose above a large dune, then swooped toward the soldiers. Viktor's astral projection grinned an insubstantial smile from the sky as he saw a pillar of fire light up the desert night. *Scratch one tank.* Below him, most of the soldiers were fleeing in terror, although a few had fallen insensate in the presence of the star-spawn or were clutching at their own eyes to expunge its horrid sight. One brave soldier lifted a rocket launcher and aimed it squarely at the abomination. The rocket whooshed toward the star-spawn, briefly outlining it like a photo negative against the desert. But the star-spawn croaked another gout of gibberish and landed atop the soldier. When the abomination lifted off again, there was no sign of the soldier and a jumble of broken glass where once there was sand.

Viktor's perceptions were snapped back to his body suddenly as he felt a coil tighten around his left bicep. He ripped at the constriction with his right arm, but his hand caught only air. *It's just a tenuous manifestation of Set, nothing more,* he said. *But if it's getting through my natural defenses, that means Neferhe's ritual is almost done.*

And the network of glowing red obelisks stretched nearly to the horizon. *Even my abomination can consume the living only so fast. What if I confronted Neferhe directly? I might delay or distract her, but I'll be at ground zero of her power and thus more or less at her mercy.*

Another quick, difficult incantation, and Viktor was standing atop the rock outcropping, panting heavily as he gasped, "Neferhe . . ."

The olive-skinned woman smiled cruelly, holding a wavy-bladed dagger and clutching at a ceramic medallion over her purple robes. "Viktor. The clouds foretold your presence. Are you presenting yourself as an offering to Set?"

"We both know that Set is just the means to an end, Neferhe."

"And what great glory is that, dearest Viktor? Think of it! The gods themselves are just tools for me. Behold the ruin of the world, Viktor, and weep that I will accomplish what you could not!"

In the back of his mind, Viktor could feel his star-spawn battling with a demonic abomination of Neferhe's creation. He was careful to keep his face a mask as he felt his star-spawn tear into the flesh of Neferhe's red-skinned abomination. *She lost The Butcher when she attacked my castle, and she was too busy working on the Set summoning to properly replace it. And if I can keep her busy, she won't realize that her abomination is overmatched.*

"Don't end it all, Neferhe. You can put Set's power to more . . . focused purposes. You could rule here, create a dynasty far greater than any of your ancestors -- or the descendants that didn't spend four thousand years sleeping in the sands."

"You think I want to rule here, Viktor, you fool? That's the weakness I saw in my father's eyes when he brought Set forth at the dawn of time. I could see that he wouldn't go through with ending it. He was going to . . ." She spat the word out. ". . . *focus* on remaking the world in his image, not ending it all."

My star-spawn has won, and now it's consuming her priests, Viktor thought.

"I'm not weak like that, Viktor. I'm going to end it all, probably before the sun rises."

Viktor paused, then gave Neferhe a tight-lipped smile. "Look around you, Neferhe. Some of your red obelisks have gone dark. One by one, they're crumbling into the darkness and being consumed by the sands."

Neferhe looked about her, wildly. "W-what? No -- Set draws nigh! The world convulses in chaos!"

"For how long? I know a little of your history, Neferhe. I know what happens when this ritual gets interrupted. So do you, of course. You were the one who interrupted it last time."

Neferhe fell to her knees and began screaming. Sand began to sting Viktor's face as he prepared the incantation to whisk him from this place.

"The sandstorm is coming, Neferhe. And this time, it'll bury you for good."

Episode 16: Gilman's Dominoes

I never expected to return to consciousness. And I certainly didn't expect it to happen so gradually. I've been near death before -- I was in the war, you know -- and I remember starting awake after surgery, like I'm bolting upright in my bed after a bad dream.

The first time I passed out trying to contact a hadribor, it was the same sudden awakening. And when I nearly died performing eidetic transubstantiation last year, I came back thrashing so hard that I burst through my restraints.

This is different. I only slowly, vaguely got the sense that I was thinking again, and for quite some time, I just thought about thinking without regard to myself as the thinker.

I don't have any sense of time passing, so I'm not sure how long I remained in this state of inchoate consciousness. It took a lot of "thinking about thinking" to dredge up a name out of the churning not-quite-thoughts that surround me. A name: Gilman. And knowing that name was like pulling the loose thread on the cuff of a sweater. I started to remember images, events, logical sequences, causes and effects. You might say I found the blueprint for "me," and I started reassembling my mind.

I'm now in possession of my psyche; I'm fully self-aware. What I lack is any external stimuli. No sight, no sound, no sensation whatsoever. I don't even perceive the absence of stimuli. I don't see darkness or hear silence. I simply cannot perceive.

Faced with sensory deprivation, a lesser mind conjures up something comforting or at least explicable -- often a place from memory, a religious fantasy-place, or just an inky, quiet void. (I know firsthand that

darkness is far more comforting than utter nothingness.) But my mind is a far more flexible tool, and it has trained in dozens of techniques to withstand such deprivation, everything from psychological coping mechanisms to more esoteric meditative disciplines. It's as if my self-awareness is itself self-aware. If I can rebuild my entire mind from scratch with no external referents, I can handle this timeless, senseless reality. In short, I can wait. So I do. I think, and rebuild, and wait.

As I wait, I replay cause and effect from the beginning of Gilman's mortal life, watching each event tipping like a domino into the next in a sort of propulsive movement that seems to have its own animate purpose. Yet I'm detached enough to see the truth: Each domino, each event is a singular, crystalline effect from the previous moment and the cause of the subsequent moment. Remove a domino, and the illusion of progress ends in a clatter. Twist an event sideways, and the dominoes tumble in a different direction.

There is, of course, one cause-and-effect -- one fallen domino -- that can't be manipulated, and that's the last effect. The effect of two bullets entering my brain. There aren't any dominoes after that one, so it does no good to contemplate what would have happened by changing that event. Agnar shooting me is immutable.

It's immutable unless the reconstruction of my mind is the effect born of that fatal cause. But no falling domino can stretch across that vast gulf between "eldritch scientist on the verge of solving the universe" and "disembodied presence devoid of all perception." Some of my dominoes are missing -- which sounds enough like an idiom for madness that I imagine my flesh-and-blood self chuckling mirthlessly.

A troubling thought ripples across the vast ocean of my consciousness. The name -- "Gilman" -- that triggered the reconstruction of my mind? I didn't "think" the name into existence by myself. Something outside, something beyond this formless reality fed it to me. I was a thinker without identity before I received the name "Gilman," and without that name I wouldn't be self-aware. Someone told me who I was, and thus enabled my reconstruction.

That thought triggers questions: Who names me Gilman? What exists outside the structure of my mind? Would another name have created another me? Unanswerable questions, so I continue to wait. But my wait is no longer the satisfied patience of the self-constructed man. It's the anxious wait of the schoolboy at the headmaster's office, unsure whether he has been summoned for praise or punishment. And I am deserving of both great praise and stern punishment in my past life as Gilman, so I cannot guess the motive of the one who named me.

I continue to wait, but I feel my consciousness fraying around the edges as I worry about the motives of my namer. My thoughts rub against each other, creating mental friction that makes further meditation difficult. Anxiety stalks me like a predator, and it's a constant battle to resist the lure of imagining myself into a false but blissfully sensory reality. This sensory deprivation will not drive me mad! I can wait for the one who named me to make its presence known.

I cannot perceive how long I fretfully wait -- minutes, months, years? -- before I start to perceive the Voice. It is sonorous and deep, and despite my efforts at discipline I cling to the Voice -- cling to the glory of stimulus. The Voice almost overwhelms my carefully constructed psyche, which was bereft of perception for so long. The Voice is the literal extent of my external universe -- the only thing I know of beyond myself.

"Gilman: Consume," the Voice says. "Gilman: Consume." I imagine a new domino, quivering, tipping slowly toward the next. In that span of time, however brief or lengthy, I contemplate whether to embrace the Voice or resist it.

But the last domino I remember, the two-bullet domino, represents failure, not success. With every bit of mental effort I can muster, I reject the Voice. Any human mind can twist or alter perception -- in fact every ordinary mind does so in every waking moment. But only a fanatic, disciplined genius overmind like mine can reject perception utterly, negating the very idea of it.

Or so I tell myself. I will myself not to hear the voice. I use the nihilistic meditation of mad Dr. Krauzen. I try to retreat into the "howling" state that the Vakutheran monks perfected in the Middle Ages. I form a psychic tower of will as the Lord of Sacrifices himself once instructed me.

And the tower holds against the onslaught of the Voice. I cannot hear it; I am back in a formless state where I can perceive nothing beyond my own consciousness. My thoughts briefly flicker to my memory of the Voice, and for an instant I recall what the Voice sounded like.

That instant is the twisting domino that marks my doom. Once I replay the sound of the Voice in my head, I can't stop thinking about it. I've closed any actual perception of the Voice, but these echoes in my imagination -- they're enough to put the Voice inside my defenses. Once I imagine hearing the Voice, it's as powerful as actually hearing the Voice.

Instinctively, I know I must consume, and I do. I greedily take in the geyser of energy offered me.

Sensations of my body resume. It is a new, metallic form, far larger than my human one, bristling with weapons both physical and mystical. Where once I had limbs, I now have . . . deadlier protrusions.

My vision resumes, or at least a semblance of it. I feel the giddy rush of awakened potential as my sight extends around corners, beyond colors, into realms governed by science and by sorcery.

My hearing resumes, and I hear the Voice again. I know it was the Voice that whispered "Gilman" to me, that invisibly directed my reconstruction, and that now provides me with motive force.

"Omega Commands Gilman: Configure/Travel."

A domino falls into place as my mechanical parts scurry to obey.

Episode 17: The Final Destination

Viktor rubbed his eyes wearily, then returned to reading St. Germain's treatise on chirurgomancy. The stars may soon be right, he thought, but I need to be certain where to array my sorcerous forces.

On the table to his left, a disembodied hand squirmed in a pool of its own blood, dipping its fingers in the reddish-brown fluid. Then like a spider, it scurried over to a stack of parchment and started a strange, lurching dance atop it.

Then the hand returned to the puddle of blood, and Viktor picked up the top sheet of parchment. Fingerpainted in blood on it: "time known place unknown ?"

"Exactly," Viktor said. "Three weeks from tonight, but I don't know where. St. Germain is his usual obtuse self, the Diary of Althotas contradicts itself, and the relevant section is missing from Tobaine's Catalogue.

"I'm about to delve into the Key of Solomon -- now that I have the page Minerva stole from me. But it's called the Key for a reason. It's useful only if I have the right lock."

Buried beneath a mountain of granite, a piezoelectric switch engaged, then another, and the collection of processing power that referred to itself as Omega flashed into wakefulness. With a throbbing drumbeat, it sent signals across the world.

To a silent submarine beneath the ice floes of the arctic: Commence/Scan/Final.

To a sorcery-reprogrammed NOAA satellite over the Azores: Commence/Scan/Final.

To the secret radar installations along the Volga at Saratov Oblast: Commence/Scan/Final.

To the "Magic Lantern" surveillance software at FBI headquarters, Quantico: Commence/Scan/Final.

Thousands of eyes and ears across the globe, real and virtual, electronic and mystical, knowing and unknowing, all received the same command: Commence/Scan/Final.

With a satisfied snap, Viktor closed the cover on the Key of Solomon, stood up, and strode to the steel cabinet against the library's far wall. Hearing the scurrying of the disembodied hand, he turned back toward his desk, then flicked his hand outward. Electric blue sorceries flitted in the air, scattering many of the papers on the desk, but holding aloft a single piece of parchment so Viktor could see it from across the room. In dripping blood was another message: "Success ?"

"I'm not that much of an optimist. Call it 'progress' if you like. We'll see if Neferhe's instincts were right about the Antikythera Mechanism. If the incantation from the Key of Solomon opens up the damned box, we might find our answer in there."

Tracing designs in the air with his hands, Viktor began dismantling the eldritch protections arrayed around the cabinet. Then he reached inside and pulled out a bronze box covered with spinning dials and gears.

"I think all of us endbringers knew that things were coming to a head, so we all cast about for antiquities like this -- anything that would give us an edge. It looks like I wound up with the artifacts that matter -- the ones that'll tell me where to go to end the world," Viktor said.

"And over the last several months, most of the other endbringers have fallen from the path -- or I've pushed them. Now it's down to just me and Omega."

Its commands sent, the distributed being known as Omega waited. Hours later, it sensed a thrum across its web of wire and cable. With the speed of lightning, it traced the thrum to its source.

Omega noted the source of the response: HAVE STARE Radar Installation Norway. It translated that precious message into a long string of binary, then sent the digital pulse back along its web, but inward, inward to a chamber deep within the granite of a Colorado mountain.

Within that chamber, nestled in a tangle of wires, probes, and sensors, was a stone disc a dozen feet in diameter. Running in channels carved into the stone, the blood of the Tonalpohualli stone began to dance.

The sensors in the chamber picked up the drumbeat of the dance and sent it across the web of wire: Imperative/Converge/Final . . . Imperative/Converge/Final . . .

Another scramble from the hand and another message in blood on parchment: "Agnar ?"

"He's the remaining wild card. A lot of the old Scandinavian demonology texts talk about Agnar and the Gjallerhorn being the harbinger of the end of the world. But they aren't clear on whether Agnar is one way to bring about the end, or the only way to bring about the end. A lot of first-millennium texts are quite parochial that way.

"In any case, he made it clear that he doesn't want anyone ending the world. When I succeed, he'll be disappointed -- for a fraction of a second before he and his horn wink out of existence."

Viktor turned the last dial, and the bronze box popped open with a hiss, instantly clouding the library in a pall of velvety vapor. Then one by one, globules of purple light rose from the box and hung suspended in the firmament of the vapor.

Viktor squinted at the arrangement of purple motes, then gave the disembodied hand a toothy grin. "If I know my astronomy, we're going to Vardo Island. It was a flux point during the Transit of Venus in 1769. But in three weeks, it'll be something more. Much more."

Episode 18: Agnar Confronts Omega

The helicopter swoops over the last ridgeline, throwing up great spirals of snow in its wake. Ahead of me is the HAVE STARE radar complex, and I can see military helicopters rising to confront me and armored cars speeding out toward the fenced perimeter. I unclip myself from the pilot's seat, rip off my nightvision goggles, and start banking to port.

I can see muzzle flashes from other helicopters -- whatever the US military is using nowadays -- and I'm a little surprised. I had figured I'd get some stern warnings over the radio before they opened fire.

I'm over the fence line, and I feel the shudder as something -- ten bucks says it's machinegun fire from the ground -- hits the nacelles behind me. I'm pretty sure the next thing that hits me will be a missile -- either from the ground or from the other choppers. So I yank the stick sharply to starboard and start bleeding altitude. In the wan moonlight, I can see the far ridgeline slowly creeping across the windscreen. I grab my rifle and pack, then pop the hatch open. Now comes the tricky part.

The helicopter passes just a few feet over the ridge, though it's higher than I planned. This is going to hurt. I plant my boots against the seat and launch myself out the hatch, hoping the snowdrifts on the ridgeline are as deep as they look.

I feel the wind get knocked out of me when I hit, and the snow is deep enough to keep me from rolling too far. Ignoring the pain in my gut, I twist around to watch my helicopter fly on. Ten bucks says the missiles get it before it splashes into the Barents Sea. There's a flash and a low, whumping boom, and I silently pay myself the ten bucks.

I grab my rifle and get ready to run across the darkened tundra toward the nearest buildings. My foot kicks something hard in the snow beneath me.

It's the Gjallerhorn. Of course. I brush the snow off it, thrust it into my belt, and start loping toward what I hope is a deserted aircraft hangar.

As I run, I allow myself a moment of satisfaction in what I've just done: jumped out of a flying helicopter moments before it blows up. I'm inside the fence at one of the most heavily guarded military installations in the world. The world's military powers may have collectively gone crazy in the last few months -- maybe because of one of the endbringers -- but they haven't moved troops away from HAVE STARE.

Military cargo planes have been flying in here around the clock. I've got to believe that those cargoes have nothing to do with "tracking space debris" (the official purpose of the radar installation) or even "spying on the Russians" (the real reason they built this place back in the nineties).

So I was suspicious even before the tree turned white.

I grew up here, but I'm not sentimental enough to ignore what a bleak place Vardo Island is. There's only one tree on the whole island, and it's right in the center of town. The villagers build a house around it every fall to keep it alive through the winter. It turned bone white and died last week.

The tree was centuries old. More to the point, it's the only thing on the island older than I am. If that isn't a sign from the gods, I don't know what is. There's a painful irony, though, in the fact that I've been criss-crossing the globe for my inexplicably long life, trying to stop endbringers and whatever weird apocalyptic cults reared their ugly heads. Apparently I just needed to keep an eye on the tree that's practically in my backyard.

I reach the edge of the lighted area around the hangar, and I sprint the remaining few feet to the nearest door. It's locked with a keycard swipe. And I guess I've done my job too well, because there aren't any nearby guards from which I could get a keycard.

But there's a utility ladder to the roof, so I start climbing. Atop the hangar, there's a skylight, but a thick glaze of ice and the prevailing darkness leave me unable to see what's beyond it. I should have kept the night goggles, because now I'll have to do this blind. Rummaging through my pack, I clip a rope to my waist, tie the other end to the top rung of the ladder, then leap onto the skylight, stomping through the safety glass and falling into the hangar.

The trick with a rope descent like this is to twist counterclockwise as you fall. I'm about 20 feet from the hangar deck when I see soldiers and fire my rifle from the hip. The recoil from the gun is enough to counter my counterclockwise twisting, and I get four kills before I hit the ground. If you don't twist beforehand, the kick from the rifle spins you so fast on the rope that you can't aim.

Unclipping from the rope when my boots hit the deck, I take out three more guards and scan the hangar's other entrances. Spying a stairway down, I creep closer. Tunnels between the buildings? Given the amount of snow we get on Vardo Island, that makes a certain amount of sense.

Two more guards stand near a blast door at the bottom of the stairs. They had heard the gunshots, but I get to them so quickly that they barely have their rifles in hand. Thanks for the keycards, boys.

The two guards on the other side of the blast door are a surprise, though. I take them out with my hands, because I figure gunshots will echo a long way in these tunnels.

Ahead of me is a tunnel big enough for a cargo truck, alight with flickering yellow fluorescents. Keeping to the shadows as best I can, I start to creep away when the dead soldiers' radios crackle to life.

"Agnar, Gilman speaks to you. North tunnel, then west."

I whisper a curse. So much for stealth. And Gilman? The endbringer with the vat-monster below the hospital? I had killed him myself, and he wasn't exactly in cahoots with the U.S. military.

Then the radios start emitting staccato bursts of static. It's a sorcerous rhythm designed to dull the senses; I heard it on jungle drums during a mission many years ago. So I do my best to ignore it and creep down

the tunnel. I know Gilman or whatever is on to me, but I still cling to the shadows. Old instincts die hard, I guess.

I turn west, and the tunnel starts sloping downward in an irregular spiral. These things are going deeper than you'd need to for transit tunnels, or even for hardening against a missile attack. One final turn of the spiral, and I'm at the entrance of a massive chamber.

The chamber looks like a warehouse, with shipping crates stacked up against the walls and forklifts buzzing around the perimeter. I do a double take when I realize that no one is driving the forklifts.

In the center of it all are six forklifts, each holding a tapered, silvery oblong on its blades. The forklifts pirouette around each other, spiraling outward and rushing inward. I'm no sorcerer, but I instinctively see an eldritch pattern to the dance of the forklifts.

And I'm no weapons officer, but I'm pretty sure those are cruise missile warheads on each forklift.

There's a popping sound behind me, so I kick to the side and whirl around, rifle up. The cables and pipes on the tunnel walls rip themselves from the walls and slither into the center of the tunnel. I check my six, and the shipping containers make a grating slide across the concrete to block my path into the chamber.

The cables and pipes rise from the tunnel floor, forming a writhing mass in midair that resolves itself into a crude, leering face.

"Agnar, Omega speaks to you. You are the mandatory witness."

The cables and pipes fly at me. By the time I flinch, they're already squeezing me tight. I feel three soft pops in my torso -- probably my ribs breaking. I'm lifted aloft and practically cocooned in cable and piping. I try to struggle, but it has wrapped me so tightly that I can't even flex a muscle.

Cables recede from my face so I can see. I'm suspended aloft above the forklifts. And I can feel more bones breaking, joints popping. I wonder dumbly how it is I'm still conscious.

"Agnar, Omega speaks to you. Witness the summation of this existence. Witness the summation of Moloch."

Episode 19: Gods Walk the Earth

As soon as I set foot on Vardo Island, I feel a strange tension -- energy rising up from the ground, and it chases my exhaustion away.

Behind me, parka-clad cultists start unloading the temple gear for the summoning. There aren't as many as I'd like. Getting to a godforsaken -- literally godforsaken -- island in the Arctic is never easy. The fact that my rival Neferhe briefly summoned Set and thus ignited globe-spanning wars and strife made travel even harder. And Omega is looking for me and mine, thus it's harder still.

But I am here, and the people I have are well trained and singular of purpose. Tonight, they'll help me end the world.

I feel the presence behind me, the massive bulk of my greatest creation. "Viktor . . ." it whispers to me in a voice like a children's choir being dashed on the rocks. I turn, and there it is: an abomination of writhing tentacles and sinuous nether-limbs. Its red eyes cast flickering crimson searchlight beams across the

snowdrifts. As big as a city bus, my star-spawn floats suspended above the snow, its leathery, feather-tipped wings making desultory arcs in the snowflake-laden air. "Viktor . . . command me . . ."

It's learning English, which is useful. Its native tongue of guttural croaks and screams renders me hoarse, and I'll need my voice for the end of the ritual.

"Hunt all who live, star-spawn. But remain close, and keep a watchful eye on our followers."

My cultists start to raise the standing stones in the prescribed pattern, then slowly roll out the altar slab of green stone. Tonight it will turn red with blood, then black with fell purpose.

The sanguine dance continued on the carved stone wheel, and a cocoon of cables and tubes recorded and transmitted the movement of every drop of blood. Its sorcerous will carried across the electronic ether, Omega began to consume the temporal power it had gathered. Volumes on worldwide stock exchanges instantly tripled. Brokers and banks everywhere stared at their monitors in disbelief, trying to comprehend nonsensical, contradictory buy and sell orders. Currency markets began to thrash around like dying beasts.

Thousands of miles away, Agnar watched helplessly as the forklifts bearing the warheads stopped their spiraling dance and rushed to the center of the chamber. He tried to turn his head, but pipes held his head and neck in a vise that forbade even fractional movement. Agnar briefly closed his eyes, but felt white-hot pain as animate wires reached under his eyelids and pried them open by force.

Before him, the warheads slowly began to discorporate, turning fuzzy and extruding vaporous tendrils of reality that evaporated into nothingness.

I assumed Omega would detonate them, Agnar thought. But he's consuming them somehow.

The stones are in place. Behind me, my cultists shuffle forward through the falling snow. Each kneels down before the altar slab, chants the phrase, "O, Nyarlathotep! Show me wonders beyond space and time!" then bends forward to kiss the blood-soaked stone.

Then I do my work: an ancient stone dagger rammed into the spot where the skull meets the spine. The dagger is blunt with ages spent in the underwater sands, so the butchery takes all the strength I can muster.

After I've killed each of them, their bodies shamble toward the frozen beach and into the icy waters of the Arctic.

Now the murder is done, and the few remaining cultists gather around me as I stand atop the ebony stone slab, slick with blood. I face the waters and shout into the howling winds: "Arise, Nyarlathotep, arise! Arise, Nyarlathotep, arise!"

I feel a shudder within the world, and dimly I see a sharp crack in the roiling sea at the horizon. Nyarlathotep, the thing that should not be, is coming.

Agnar heard a burst of static, then the flat, clipped voice: "Agnar, Omega speaks to you. Witness Moloch made manifest."

In the center of the chamber was a faintly glowing, half-seen presence. Only by focusing on its phantasmic edges could Agnar gain a sense of the whole: a giant with the shoulders and head of a bull, its maw bloody with chunks of gore.

"For eons I have sipped at the cup of all that is youthful and vital. Now the veil is parted, and I take deep drafts. Bring me the world, that I might consume it! I, Moloch, hunger for one final, glorious meal!"

The clipped voice of Omega again: "Summoning complete. Gilman, return to zero, zero. Soldiers, return to zero, zero."

It's a sky-high presence before me, all tentacles and jaws and coruscating energy. Rivulets of sea water and ichor cascade down its serpentine bulk.

I've waited for years for this moment. I've practiced this incantation a thousand times, mastered its subtle liturgies, and pored through ancient tomes to ensure that every word would find favor with the god that now stands before me.

But when the god -- the actual deity -- stands before me, I find that I have to bury the rising panic before I can find my voice.

"Oh, subverter of the real, I invite you to the culmination of all that is! Tonight, you will revel in the greatest falsehood of all -- reality itself! Tonight, all the necessary deceits will crash through the wailing walls of the world! Tonight, reality is exposed as nothing more than the most audacious lie of all!"

Its reply is a susurrant whisper, but it's so deafeningly loud that I reflexively clap my hands over my ears and fall to one knee.

"With MY sanction, you may expose the FIRST and FINAL deception. I am WELL PLEASED. But know THIS TRUTH: Another seeks to CONSUME your prize before you can END it."

Episode 20: The End

Snow swirled around the runners as they sprinted toward the buildings in the distance, their boots crunching with each heavy step. Viktor and a half-dozen of his followers paused at the chain-link fence.

"One moment, my children!" Viktor shouted over the rising wind.

A dark, roiling shadow fell across them. Viktor gestured, and out of the snowscape came his star-spawn abomination, equal parts monstrosity from beyond space, ancient evil from the desert sands, and obscene tumor-thing from an eldritch cancer. Aloft on leathery wings, it encircled each of the tiny figures, pulling them into midair, over the fence, and toward the top-secret installation where Viktor's final rival waited.

Returned to the ground, Viktor felt the flicker of mutating reality as he briefly took on a monstrous lizard-shape, then resumed his human form.

Must be a side effect of Nyarlathotep's presence, he thought. Things are starting to change of their own accord. It feels like I'm donning a mask when my form changes like that. I suppose that means Nyarlathotep's manifestation is growing stronger.

The star-spawn swooped ahead, its crimson eyes bathing soldiers in hellfire. Its tendrils licked outward, tearing the rifle-bearing troops in half in the blink of an eye. Those who weren't burning or dismembered fled into the snowy wastes or fell insensate, unable to comprehend the tentacled horror before it.

Another flicker, and Viktor felt the foreign presence of another mask sliding across his face. He looked down to find white, tufted paws where his hands once were. Viktor blinked, and his gloved hands were back -- but with thumbs on the other side of each hand.

And Viktor shuddered as he entered the base of a radar tower. Another force tugged at his soul, a steady pull like sand falling through an hourglass. Viktor's followers stumbled exhausted into the building after him. Two collapsed, barely breathing.

"The enemy would consume us from within, my children," Viktor said. "Be strong in your faith, and follow me to eternity!"

That force I feel is too consumptive to be Omega alone -- Omega must have summoned Moloch. My followers can't survive long here, and I'll last only a little longer. If my star-spawn can't break the connection somehow, Omega wins.

A downward staircase led Viktor and his haggard cultists to a wide tunnel spiraling deeper into the earth. A wave of Viktor's hand, and the star-spawn reincorporated, its bulk nearly filling the passageway. The pull of Moloch strengthened near the end of the tunnel, and another of Viktor's followers collapsed. It feels like my soul is being sucked through a straw, Viktor thought.

The star-spawn rushed into the massive chamber at the end of the tunnel, Viktor in its wake. Behind barricades were more soldiers with rifles -- inconsequential, thought Viktor. At the edges of the chamber were podlike clusters of pipe and wire, slowly waving as if stirred by an occult breeze.

In the center of the chamber was an abomination of chrome and sinew. Dragon scales merged with high-tensile cables and armored steel. Turrets formed its joints, and each of its four limbs was equal part talon and tank-tread.

The soldiers began firing their rifles at the star-spawn, which ignored their petty bullets as it swooped toward the metal creature before it. The red searchlight eyes of the star-spawn turned soldiers afire as its tendrils snaked around Omega's abomination. But then the star-spawn croaked and screamed, some of its tentacles ripped away in a jackhammer roar of pistons. The metal abomination whirled in place, then extruded a tank cannon that spat a sizzling, gray goo at the star-spawn.

Viktor pressed himself against a pylon at the chamber entrance, then extended his sorcerous senses, seeking a weak spot in the rival abomination. He could feel Moloch's dark presence like an anchor weighing everything down, and Nyarlathotep's power like a skittering swarm of insects, alighting briefly on friend and foe alike.

Viktor immediately sensed three things, all of them bad.

He saw Omega's power like a crystal lattice surrounding the chamber. I'm inside Omega, he thought. Not exactly a position of strength when Omega's trying to consume everything.

And like a torch in the miasmic darkness of Moloch's presence was a soul Viktor recognized as Agnar. But Agnar was immobilized in a mass of animate cables and pipes, held fast to the wall.

Amid the whirling energy that gave motive force to Omega's abomination was a sinister overmind: Gilman. I thought Agnar killed him, but he lives on as part of Omega's abomination.

A massive overhead blow from the Gilman-abomination knocked the star-spawn out of the air and made the whole chamber shiver. Then Gilman pounced, extruding spikes and sawblades that cut deep into what passed for the star-spawn's flesh.

The star-spawn partially disincorporated, then reformed above Gilman, raining down streams of fire and venomous jabs from its stingers. Gilman responded with another volley from its cannon, landing a splat of gray on the star-spawn.

The star-spawn screamed an unholy, keening wail, rendering soldier and cultist alike insensate. It sloughed off a boiling mass of useless hide and lurched toward Gilman, growing new tentacles for another assault.

Shrieking and croaking, the star-spawn threw most of its tentacles at Gilman's forelimbs, tearing one from its mooring and finding purchase under the armor plates. Eldritch poisons coursed through the veins and conduits of the Gilman abomination's form. But a wide, arcing buzzsaw from Gilman cut through the star-spawn's tentacles, freeing Gilman. The star-spawn screamed again, fell to the chamber floor, and lay there quiescent for a moment before lurching into the air, spewing ichor and star-stuff in its wake.

New armor plates fell into place as the hobbled Gilman abomination paused. Then it began to stalk the star-spawn, firing its cannon, then rushing toward the star-spawn whenever it paused.

The Gilman-thing will slay my star-spawn the next time they clash, Viktor thought. And it'll kill me before I can use my sorcery. I need one more good trick, and I need it now.

Viktor concentrated on the flickering sensation that was Nyarlathotep. I have to time this exactly right. Like a flash of lightning, Viktor felt a form change wash over him, blunted by Moloch's presence. But the thinnest connection might be enough. It'll have to be.

Viktor held an image of Agnar in his mind, visualizing every strand of blond hair and mimicking his posture from their Amazon jungle meeting. I am Agnar of the Gjallerhorn. I am the harbinger of the end of the world. Concentrate. Concentrate! Nyarlathotep's flickering change-energy receded like the tide, but Viktor could feel an invisible mask surrounding him.

"Omega, you don't get to end the world! Only I do!" cried Viktor/Agnar from the chamber entrance.

Pipes, cables, and wires detached from the walls and hissed through the air, entangling Viktor/Agnar in a whirling spiderweb and freeing up the real Agnar at the same time. He wrestled against the constriction, but he could feel Omega tightening around him.

Almost forgotten by endbringer and god alike, Gilman pounced on the star-spawn, ripping tendrils from the polyped mass of its body. The star-spawn delivered one last soul-shattering scream, then struggled feebly against the metal monstrosity.

Wrenching his neck to one side, Viktor could dimly make out another human on the periphery of the chamber. A hoarse cry escaped Viktor's lips: "Agnar, sound the horn!"

Agnar rose to one knee, wavered, then pulled the Gjallerhorn from his waist. "But if I do --"

"The world will end if you don't!" Then a steel cable wrapped around Viktor's windpipe, silencing him.

The Gilman abomination arose from the muck of the star-spawn carcass and began limping toward Agnar. Omega sent a snake-swarm of pipes and cables rushing from the walls.

Closing his eyes, Agnar raised the horn to his lips and blew.

A sonorous, clarion tone resounded through the chamber, echoing upward. The tone quavered as it spread across Vardo Island, then across the seas. All could hear the Gjallerhorn, near or far, awake or asleep, living or dead.

The spiderweb of pipes and cables released the captive Viktor, then hung in the air, unmoving. The Gilman abomination stopped with a clatter, then began to belch smoke, blood, and oil as it collapsed in on itself. The supernatural darkness of Moloch faded like shadows before the dawn.

And below a faraway mountain, a great stone disc cracked, shattered, then crumbled into dust.

"What happens now, Viktor?" Agnar shook the endbringer's shoulders.

"You were the final ingredient. The world ends now, with Nyarlathotep revealing the contradictions and lies that lie beneath the surface of reality." Viktor sat up.

"You planned this all along, didn't you? You set it up so I had to blow the horn." Agnar gripped Viktor's shoulders tighter.

"No, I merely took advantage of the circumstances that presented themselves. I thought I was going to end the world without your help. If you're an endbringer, the Gjallerhorn is the most frightening thing in the world, because we can't account for it in our plans."

Agnar loosened his grip and threw his head back with a mirthless laugh. "Maybe I shouldn't believe you, but I do. How'd you trick Omega into thinking I'd gotten free?"

"For a moment, I actually became you, so it wasn't a trick from Omega's point of view. But I didn't have the Gjallerhorn, so the original Agnar was still crucial."

Agnar paused, then looked around the ruined chamber. "So what happens now?"

"Reality is being revealed as the grandest lie of all, so it'll fall apart over the next few minutes. Ever tried to lift a completed jigsaw puzzle? That's what it'll be like. The edges of reality will crumble away, then more and more will fall apart until there's nothing left," Viktor stood up and began to make sorcerous gestures.

Agnar stood next to him. "What about you? I know enough about endbringers to know that most believe that if you end the world, you get to create the next one."

"Well, there's an element of truth to that, but it's not that simple." Viktor turned toward Agnar. "After all, you lived in this world for centuries. Can you imagine anyone creating this existence on purpose?"

"Good point."

"I am making a door into the next world, however. You could walk through it too -- if you like."

Agnar shook his head. "No, I think I'm supposed to stay here until the bitter end." Another short, sharp laugh. "Besides, you're just going to destroy the next world, too, right? You don't want me there, because I'd stop you cold."

Now Viktor laughed, long and hard. A few more gestures, and a golden rectangle appeared before them. "Farewell, Agnar."

"You can't say farewell. In another minute, nobody's going to fare well or poorly. But goodbye, Viktor. I hope the next Agnar makes life hard for you endbringers."

"Goodbye then, Agnar. Enjoy the end of the world." With a step, Viktor vanished beyond the golden rectangle.

Agnar picked the Gjallerhorn off the floor. Cradling it in his hands, he smiled a broad grin.

"Well, Viktor shouldn't have it too easy in the next world," he said to himself, then hurled the horn through the rectangle and into the world beyond.